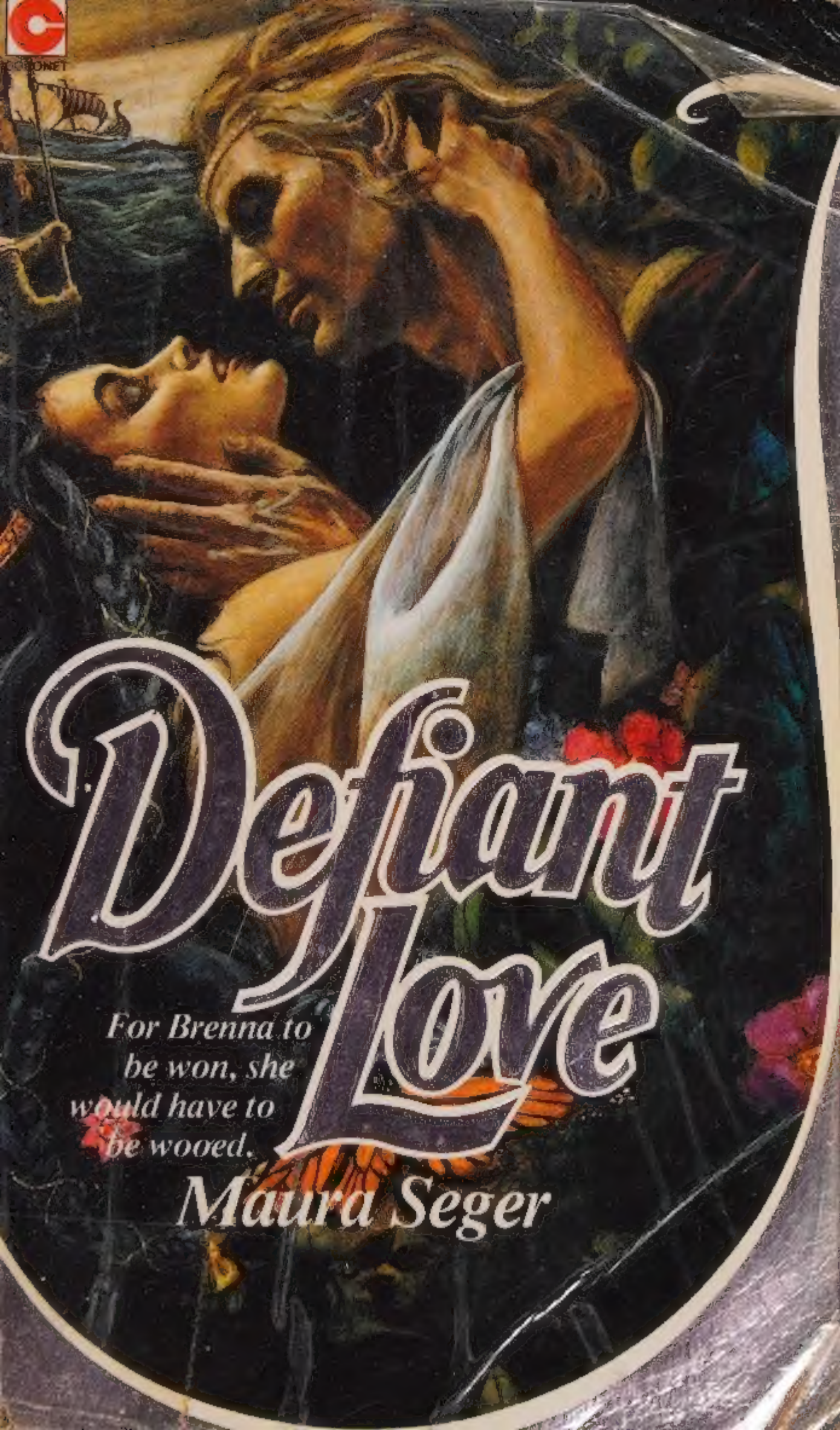
Defiant Love
For Brenna to be won, she would have to be wooed.
Maura Seger

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Guyon Stifled a Groan, Willing Himself to Remain Still

The slender, lush body of his wife pressed so closely to him was wrecking havoc with his senses. He smiled wryly, aware that he would only have to move slightly to make Brenna acutely conscious of just what she was doing to him. But it was too soon for that. Somehow managing to sound as though he was requesting some perfectly commonplace service, he said, "Kiss me, Brenna."

Her eyes flew open. The small hand that had been so pleasantly occupied on his chest froze. "W-what?"

The topaz gaze caught and held her own as Guyon calmly reminded her: "You did say you'd do whatever I told you?" Reluctantly, Brenna nodded. "Then kiss me," he repeated.

Very slowly, she obeyed. When she drew back, she was breathing hard. Guyon observed the effect with secret pleasure. His instinctive guess that the best strategy would be to let her take the lead was proving correct. Unless he was very much mistaken, the first stirrings of desire could be seen in the gray-green pools gazing at him. . . .

Defiant Love

Maura Seger

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For my husband and parents
whose love and encouragement
made it possible

Defiant Love

Chapter One

"My lady," a soft voice whispered, "you must get up. It is almost time for supper."

Tossing fitfully, Brenna tried to ignore the voice. The trip from Winchester had exhausted her. If she was to be at her best in the royal hall that evening, she needed sleep.

But with unconsciousness came terrible dreams. Twice the high-pitched voice of a very young child cried out in the empty room. There was fire and a lot of noise. She couldn't find her mother, or any of the other women. Men were laughing—harsh, guttural sounds that made her run all the faster. But her legs were too short and her strength was giving out. Soon they would find her. Not even her favorite secret place was safe. There were so many screams . . .

Brenna sat up with a jolt. She was bathed in perspiration and trembling all over.

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The young maid stared at her in concern. "Are you all right, my lady?"

Swallowing hard, Brenna fought to bring herself back under control. She had the same dream every few months and was well used to coping with its effects. Still the task was never easy. Clenching the covers, she murmured, "What is it? What do you want?"

"It's almost time for supper," the girl repeated. "I was sent to wake you." Rigorous training and a sensible appreciation of her privileged position as a servant in the king's household made the girl refrain from adding that she had a great deal of work to do and no time to waste on a young lady who had perhaps indulged in too much wine at dinner. But a closer look told her this was not the case.

"If you are ill, my lady," she said more gently, "I should summon the physician."

"N-no . . ." Brenna insisted shakily. The last thing she wanted now was some physician clucking over her. "I'm fine . . . it's just that I'm not used to sleeping in the afternoon. It left me a little fuzzy . . ."

The maid nodded in relief. This one would be no trouble, she realized. Going briskly to the door, she opened it to admit two serving women carrying between them a large brass tub. They set it in the center of the floor, then returned hurriedly with ewers of steaming water.

"The Lady Edythe," the maid explained, "thought you might want to bathe before supper."

Brenna glanced at the tub, grateful for her sister's consideration. She had forgotten to order a bath herself, and would have sorely missed it. Dismissing

all but one of the servants, who stayed to help her, she undressed hurriedly. Her tunic and mantle were badly rumpled. Telling the maid to have them pressed, Brenna was glad for once that she had ample clothing not to be worried about what she would wear that night.

Ivory pins held her waist-length black hair atop her head as she slipped blissfully into the hot water. For long moments she was content just to lie there, her large gray-green eyes closed and her delicate features relaxed. Recent rainfall had filled the palace reservoir with a soft pure water, so much more enjoyable than that dredged up from the wells or, when the need arose, taken from the salty river.

The perfume of jasmine oil, poured into her bath by a generous hand, rose to tease her nostrils. A small yellow cake of jasmine-scented soap sat in a dish beside her. Brenna reached for it with a sigh of pure pleasure. This was luxury indeed. Not even the great household at Winchester could surpass such amenities. Those who said the Earl Harold lived better than his king were mistaken, Brenna mused. Edward and his queen might not personally enjoy such indulgences, but they did not hesitate to offer them to guests.

The room itself was evidence of their generosity. Well furnished by a wooden bed strung with leather slates covered by a down-filled mattress, a table inlaid with Byzantine tiles, and two chairs, it was a far cry from the palettes spread on the floor at night for sleeping and rolled out of the way the rest of the time. They offered little comfort and certainly none of the privacy Brenna found so essential.

In that, she knew she was different from almost

everyone else around her. Most people, accustomed from infancy to never being alone, shunned solitude. From the moment they arose in the morning, through all their daily activities, to the day's final meal around trestle tables in the same hall where they slept, people were almost never by themselves. A sense of community was essential to survival, so much so that those few who did seek privacy were considered suspect.

I was lucky, Brenna considered thoughtfully as she soaped one long, slender leg, *to be born the youngest.* With all her brothers and sisters old enough to be out of the house as she was growing up, Brenna had been left very much on her own. She had her own room—an almost unheard of luxury—doting parents who, loving her though they did, lacked the energy to interfere in her life, and the time and independence to pursue her interests.

What more could anyone want?, she wondered. Certainly not the marriage Edythe had been hinting at recently. Brenna sighed, reflecting that sooner or later she was going to have to deal with the problem. At seventeen, she had already avoided matrimony far longer than most girls ever managed. Not that many even tried. Brenna knew her aversion to marriage was unusual, but she felt no urge to overcome it. When the day came that the Earl Harold, who upon the death of Brenna's father had become her guardian, seriously suggested she wed, she would take holy vows. Little though the religious life appealed to her, it was far preferable to marriage. The mere thought of being subject to any man made her stomach knot. She scowled, startling the maid who was laying out her fresh clothes.

"Is the water too hot, my lady?" she asked, ready to add from the pail of cold water standing nearby should that be necessary.

"What? Oh, no . . . Everything's fine." Recalled to herself, Brenna's normal cheerfulness returned. She smiled at the maid. "This bath is wonderful. Just what I needed."

The other girl, simply dressed in the gray fustian of servants, wrinkled her nose. "If you say so, my lady. I can't say I hold with it myself. Baths in the river on a hot day, or before some special occasion, that's one thing. But you fine folk seem to be taking them all the time." Sensing that this was no snobbish noble much taken with herself, the girl dared a question. "Why is that?"

Brenna hesitated. How to explain the sheer pleasure of cleanliness to one who would never know it? While the girl was neatly dressed, it was a good bet water hadn't touched anywhere but her hands and face in months. Her pale hair, pulled back in a wad at the nape of her neck, had a decidedly greasy look. A musty aroma rose from her, combining sweat, wood smoke, and cooking odors. Brenna hardly noticed the smell, since she had lived around it all her life.

By some standards, the girl was scrupulously clean. Certainly she couldn't be harboring any of the ubiquitous body lice that were such a common problem in less well-regulated households. Just as Edythe did at Winchester, the Queen enforced rigid rules to keep those pests from her domain. In addition, cats prowled the kitchens and halls to keep down the vermin, waste materials were dumped a good distance away to discourage flies, and fresh

rushes were laid twice a week to keep the air pure.

Emboldened by Brenna's preoccupied silence, the girl ventured to speak further. "You've just arrived, haven't you, my lady? From Winchester, they said. Have you seen the Norman yet?"

"The Norman?"

"Aye, the Seigneur Guyon D'Arcy, whose come to see the King." Limpid brown eyes rolled meaningfully. "Oh, he's a fine figure of a man, is that one! Tall and muscular with a broad chest any girl would just love to cuddle against. And his legs . . . Some don't care for the Norman tunic, but I say why shouldn't a man with long, strong legs show them?" Gaining confidence, she went on eagerly. "His hair, cut short though it is, shines like hammered gold. And his eyes! Those that have been close enough to tell say they look like fiery topazes. Cut right through you, they do. Can you imagine!"

Uninterested in the Norman's manly attributes, Brenna shrugged. "I suppose he brought a large troup of knights with him?"

"Aye, he did. And let me tell you, my lady, I've never seen such men for eating and drinking. The kitchens can hardly keep up with them. Why just yesterday, they went through two whole sides of beef." The girl put a hand to her mouth, giggling. "They're fine ones for wenching, too. Hardly give a girl a rest. But though some of us in the serving hall have been hoping the seigneur will feel like a bit of fun, he's been too busy so far. Oh, well," she sighed, "I don't imagine he'll go on that way much longer. Lucky the girl his eye falls on!"

Though she was not unaware of the custom of

sending willing house servants to warm the beds of honored guests, Brenna still flushed at the thought. What was taken for granted in the serving hall was uncharted and unwelcome territory to her.

She rose from the tub, so quickly that water splashed on the floor. The maid bent to mop it up. Brenna called for her to come help her dress instead. Obeying, the girl slipped a pale yellow tunic sewn in a multitude of tiny pleats over Brenna's head so that it fell straight to her ankles. When she moved, the tunic rippled sinuously down the length of her legs and across her slender arms. Made of finely spun linen, the tunic was soft against her skin. She was glad of the warm weather that made a woolen slip unnecessary.

Over the tunic, the maid lowered a beautifully embroidered mantle of mauve silk whose twin lengths were joined at the shoulders by thin straps secured by brooches. The brooches she selected were particularly fine. A gift from Edythe, they were studded with amethysts, as were the matching bracelets. At her throat, half-hidden by the thick fall of ebony hair, she set a golden torque emblazoned with the symbol of Harold Godwinson's house.

She was proud to wear the symbol, Brenna realized, gazing at herself in the mirror. Whatever differences the Earl Harold might have with the King, there was honor in his name—and protection.

"Oh, my lady!" the maid exclaimed. "You look beautiful, truly you do! There won't be a lovelier lady in the Hall tonight." She didn't usually make it a practice to compliment the women she was sent to wait on. But this one was truly beautiful. Moreover, she seemed completely unaware of it.

Her body, smooth as silk and warmed to a delicate apricot tint from her bath, was delicately formed, the waist small enough to be spanned by a man's hands. The arching curve of her hips promised that slender though she was, the girl would be a good bearer. Her breasts were small but beautifully rounded, the nipples pale pink roseates the shrewd maid knew full well no man had yet tasted. There was an air of innocence about her that, combined with the hint of dormant sensuality in those wide gray-green eyes, would prove irresistible to any man.

Brushing Brenna's hair, the maid wondered why she was not yet wed or at least betrothed. She should be soon or there would be trouble. Powerful though her kin were, they should realize what a temptation the lady posed. Now that she was at court, many an eager eye would settle on her and rivalries could break out without the slightest encouragement. Marriage by capture was not entirely unheard of, though it seemed a shame to deprive any bride of the ceremony that was rightfully hers. Better hurry, the maid thought, suppressing a giggle, or this one will be well and thoroughly bedded before she is ever wed! Something in the defiant set of the girl's chin warned that she wouldn't like that at all. The maid felt a brief stab of sympathy for her. Spirited though she undoubtedly was, her air of inviolability couldn't last much longer. Time and circumstances would destroy it, with or without the lady's agreement.

"That's enough," Brenna said as soon as the tangles were smoothed from her hair. She was satisfied with what she saw in the small polished metal mirror propped before her. Beneath a wide brow, her thick-fringed eyes looked clear and un-

troubled. High cheekbones and a straight, slender nose offset the somewhat lush curve of her mouth. Her long, graceful throat gave way to delicate shoulders beneath which the tunic and mantle hid the soft curve of her breasts.

Thanking the maid for her help, Brenna dismissed her. Sounds were already floating upward from the Hall where the lords and ladies were gathering. The evening promised to be unusual. To honor Duke William's emissary, the King had decreed that supper would be served in the Norman style. That meant there would be no separate tables for men and women, more than the usual number of dishes would be presented and, in an effort to keep the usual arguments to a minimum, there would be entertainment throughout the meal.

As Brenna expected, the Great Hall was crowded when she arrived. At the entranceway, she paused a moment to take in the splendor before her. Three tables stretched the length of the Hall. On a dias above them stood the table where Edward, his Queen, and their most honored guests would dine.

The long summer twilight dimmed before the radiance of a hundred candles, some wider than a man's arm, set in candlesticks of beaten gold that reflected their flames as a multitude of suns.

Kegs of ale and mead and immense wheels of cheese, all cooled in the earthen cellars, were piled against the walls. Because the weather was warm, the cooking was going on outside. Brenna could hear the crackle of flames and the low voices of the *theows* as they turned spits holding venison and salmon.

More of the slaves, held in hereditary bondage

from generation to generation or condemned to it for some crime, carried in roasts of beef and lamb, stuffed woodcocks and pigeons, hams seasoned with rare cloves from the East, and platters of breads still steaming from the baking ovens.

Brenna's mouth began to water. She looked around eagerly, wondering how long it would be before the King took his seat and the feasting could begin.

Preoccupied by the scene before her, Brenna didn't notice the blatant stares of the men who made no effort to disguise their interest in the young beauty suddenly arrived in their midst. Nor did she take in the narrow glances of the women who realized that such fresh loveliness provided serious competition for the favor of even the greatest lords. There were murmured comments as to who she might be. Several men were about to approach her to settle the matter when a steward came quickly to her side.

To her surprise, Brenna found herself ushered to the royal table. She knew Harold and Edythe would be seated there, but she hardly expected to receive the same honor. Yet the steward was quite certain that was where she was supposed to be.

Edythe, appearing from behind the tapestry partition that separated the Hall from the royal quarters, confirmed his instructions. "Of course you're sitting with us. Did you really think Harold would miss a chance to show off his beautiful young kinswoman? He's looking forward to all the questions the other lords will be asking as soon as they can get him alone."

Brenna laughed, smiling at her sister fondly. At thirty, Edythe was still considered by many to be the most beautiful woman in England. Five successful births had little changed the strong, slender body with its softly rounded breasts and hips, and narrow waist. Creamy white skin set off serene features in which large blue eyes glowed warmly. Dark red hair streaked with gold hung in heavy waves to her flanks.

As custom dictated, Edythe's hair was partly covered by the headscarf signifying a married woman. That her marriage was recognized only under ancient Anglo-Saxon law and had never been solemnized in Christian ceremony did not worry her. Like Brenna, she wore a pleated linen tunic which fell to her ankles. Left free at her arms and sides, the tunic was covered front and back by matching lengths of richly dyed and decorated fabric joined at the shoulders by oval brooches. But whereas in Brenna's case, her brooches were of modest design befitting a young, unmarried girl of good station, Edythe's were of the finest beaten gold set with glowing gem stones and large, translucent pearls.

The brooches, and the equally lovely bracelets at her wrists and ankles, were among the more outward signs of Harold Godwinson's favor. Even more telling was Edythe's confident, assured demeanor. After fifteen years, Harold still showed no sign of putting her aside in favor of a Christian marriage, even though such a union would many times have been politically useful to him. She was his lady—mother of his only acknowledged children, mistress of his household, companion of his heart. And even

Brenna, suspicious though she was of the dealings between men and women, could not help but recognize her happiness.

Beside her sister, the younger girl thought her own looks dimmed to insignificance. But in fact they were the perfect foil for each other. The ebony richness of Brenna's hair, her lithe body poised between the unconscious grace of childhood and the sensual promise of womanliness, and her faintly challenging expression never failed to attract the attention of men. Only her tart tongue, which she exercised frequently, kept them at bay.

Touched though she was by the Earl Harold's consideration for one who might otherwise have felt a little lost in the Great Hall surrounded by strangers, Brenna was certain her sister was teasing her about the degree of interest she would arouse. She said as much to Edythe, who surprised her again by insisting, "There will be much curiosity about you, Brenna. You must be prepared for that."

Before she could question her sister as to her meaning, the King entered the Hall. Edward was dressed simply in a rough brown robe. Small of stature, his translucent skin was drawn tightly over bones as delicate as a child's. Only the long white beard and the deep shadows beneath his pale eyes proclaimed his age. Though the years had bent his back slightly and weakened a constitution that had never been strong, a sense of urgency flowed from him. He seemed confined even by the Great Hall, as though his spirit required some larger space.

Excited though she was to be in the royal presence, Brenna barely noticed the King. All her

attention was focused on the Seigneur Guyon D'Arcy. He was dressed in the Norman manner in a rich blue tunic and scarlet doublet, both embroidered in gold. Beneath the tunic, which ended at mid-thigh, he wore finely spun *chausses* with the tops of the stockings tucked into soft leather boots. A wide, metal-studded belt held the doublet closed around his waist. From the belt hung the scabbard of a dress sword set with uncut gems.

The dress sword was worn out of deference to the King who, in his holiness, would have preferred men to come unarmed into his presence. No one was foolish enough to endanger his own safety, so the dress sword offered a compromise. Its rich ornamentation was meant to distract from its true purpose as a fighting weapon. Brenna had no doubt that in Guyon D'Arcy's case, the weapon could prove deadly at the slightest provocation.

True to his conditioning as a warrior knight, his tall, lean body moved with fluid grace. Wide, powerful shoulders and muscular arms framed a brawny chest tapering to a narrow waist, slender hips, and long, sinewy legs.

His dark blond hair, cut short, glistened with evidence of a recent bath. Without long hair or beard, his rugged features stood out clearly. Helpless to stop herself, Brenna's eyes lingered on the hard planes and hollows of his square face, drawn irresistibly upward to meet his gaze.

Brenna stared straight into gleaming topaz eyes half-hidden by sun-tipped lashes. A slight smile curved the unexpectedly sensual mouth as the Norman betrayed his amusement at her scrutiny.

"And may I present the Lady Brenna, kinswoman of the Earl Harold," the King was saying. "I don't believe you have met."

"The honor is mine," Guyon D'Arcy mocked softly as he took the small, cold hand reluctantly extended to him.

Brenna struggled to appear calm. Determined to ignore the tingling sensation that spread upward from the fingers Guyon so lightly grasped, she murmured, "You are far from home, my lord. Do you plan to stay long?"

What audacity had seized her? Brenna wondered in dismay. Why couldn't she have simply acknowledged the introduction and left it at that? Why prolong the uncomfortably intimate contact with the man who had yet to release her hand?

"That depends on a great many things, my lady. England shelters unexpected charms I am only beginning to discover."

Common sense told Brenna to remain silent and let the encounter end, but some contrary spirit forced her to respond. "I'm sure that England's charms cannot compare with Normandy's."

Guyon's eyebrows arched. He had not expected her to banter as the other ladies did. But since she had begun the game . . .

"Normandy's charms are certainly warmer, my lady. But what England hides behind chilly winds can be more tempting."

"But surely, my lord," the Queen interrupted, "you are not complaining about our weather? Rarely have we enjoyed a summer so pleasant."

Reluctantly, Guyon released Brenna's hand and turned to his hostess. He had no choice but to

presume that this consort of the holy Edward was as naive as she sounded. The plainness of her face and form was emphasized by a rough brown robe devoid of any ornament save a simple crucifix hung on a leather thong around her neck.

Hours spent on her knees in prayer had permanently stooped the Queen's shoulders and rounded her back. Her face beneath the starched white coif was dry and lined, unenlivened by small black eyes. At thirty-five, she looked far older. There was little left of the vivacious girl who had grown up in Winchester, sister to Harold and only daughter of the powerful Earl Godwin.

Those who had known the old earl said the Queen resembled him. Perhaps she did in appearance, but it was well known that if there had been any true resemblance in their characters, King Edward would never have married her.

The King, deeply religious though he was, had hated Earl Godwin with a rare passion. Between the two men there was never anything more than an uneasy truce, and that frequently broken. Though Edward could never prove it, he was certain Godwin was responsible for the murder of his younger brother who had foolishly attempted to return from the family's exile in Normandy before the time was right.

When fortunes changed and Edward became king, the realities of power politics forced him to accept Godwin as Earl of Wessex. He even went so far as to wed his daughter, after first determining that Edith shared his religious devotion and was possessed of an amenable, docile nature. Ties of marriage, however, had not prevented him from

rejoicing at Godwin's death even as he bowed to the inevitability of Harold's succession as the new Earl of Wessex. Over the years, the uneasy truce was continued between them, as Harold jockeyed to become the next king and Edward strove mightily to assure the throne would go only to one of his own Norman upbringing whom he could trust.

Thus Guyon's presence at the court, and his determination to maintain at least the facade of diplomatic courtesy behind which useful maneuvering might occur. Politely, he assured the Queen that he was indeed enjoying his stay, rarely had he known such balmy weather, and yes, he did believe the butterflies had never been so numerous.

Brenna barely managed to swallow a giggle of relief. With Guyon seated between the King and Harold, the Queen and Edythe on either side of them, and Brenna next to her sister, she was far enough away from the Norman to recover at least somewhat from his presence.

At least until Edythe suddenly leaned over and hissed in her ear. "What was that all about?"

"What do you mean?" Brenna returned nervously.

"You know perfectly well! That business with the Norman. What's going on?"

"N-nothing! I was just . . . making conversation."

"Some conversation," Edythe snorted. "Another minute and we would have been thinking the two of you wanted to be alone!"

"What are you talking about? There was nothing improper. . . ."

"Oh for heaven's sake, Brenna! I know how

innocent you are, but surely even you understand what it means when a man and a woman look at each other like that."

The two women broke off as a priest rose to bless the meal. As could be expected in the King's house, the prayer was longer and more involved than usual. Only Edward sat through the whole of it with his white head bowed and his gnarled hands folded reverently before him. Even the Queen, who could generally match anyone for holy endurance, had begun to shift restlessly before the final "Amen" was offered.

A collective sigh of relief swept through the Hall as the company fell to. Servants rushed forward with basins of water and towels for hand-washing. Trenchers of bread were set at each place to serve as plates for the succulent bits of fowl, beef, game, and fish that followed. Silver goblets were kept filled with cool wine as conversation mounted, providing ample cover for those who wished to speak discreetly.

"You have served the Duke for many years, my lord?" the King was asking.

Guyon nodded. "Some fourteen years, since the siege of Domfront."

"You could have been little more than a child then," the Queen exclaimed, her gentle face darkened at the thought of what that little boy must have seen.

"I was eleven, my lady," Guyon told her calmly. "I had the honor to serve as the Duke's squire after my cousin, who had held the post, died from a fever a few days into the siege."

Listening to his matter-of-fact recital of the events that first brought him to the Duke's notice, Brenna

shivered. She knew well enough what had happened at the siege of Domfront. When that town, loyal to rivals of the Duke, refused to surrender, William hit upon the master-stroke of making an example of its unsuspecting neighbor, Alencon. That town, believing all attention to be focused elsewhere and having no role in the quarrel anyway, was poorly defended. Worse yet, its citizens had made the mistake of publicly mocking William for his bastard birth. Seized in a lightning-stroke, scores of Alencon's residents had their hands and feet cut off as a sign of the Duke's displeasure.

When word of the atrocity reached Domfront, the stronghold speedily surrendered, putting an end to challenges to William's rule at least from northern France.

"Your cousin?" Harold queried. "Would he also have been a D'Arcy?"

Something in the seemingly innocent question made Brenna stiffen. She sensed the answer even before Guyon murmured. "No, my lord, he was not. D'Arcy was my mother's name."

So Guyon, like the Duke he served, had also been born out of wedlock. And like the Duke, he clearly did not care to be reminded of the fact. Tension flickered between the Norman and the Earl, which Edward sought hastily to ease. "My guests," he said, gesturing to the assembled lords and ladies, "seem to be enjoying this style of dining."

That was true, Brenna admitted grudgingly. The novelty of men and women sitting together at the same tables lent a special air of vivaciousness to the evening. Moderating their normally rough-edged manners, the lords offered subtle encouragement to

the ladies bent on indulging in a little mutually pleasurable flirting. Whereas talk of politics and war usually held the men's attention at meals, a different sort of combat now held sway. Eyes gleamed and lips parted in smiles as, under the shelter of the tables, battle-toughened thighs pressed temptingly against soft, slender limbs.

"It's just as well the priest did such a thorough job of the blessing," Edythe teased, sending her Earl an inviting smile.

Harold wasn't shy about returning her look. His eyes wandered appreciatively over the ripe lithesome form of his lady. While nothing could cause him to relax his guard in the King's house, especially not while Guyon D'Arcy was present, he could see no harm in a little light distraction.

Watching the wordless loveplay between her sister and the Earl, who though almost forty was still as handsome and well-built as any woman could want, Brenna felt as though she viewed a mystery whose contours were only just beginning to become known to her. The fact that she had any sense at all of what it might be like to feel desire made her flush.

Always before, the sensual feint and parry she witnessed would have meant nothing to her except that the promised trip to London market the following day would be delayed. Certainly, Edythe would not be rising early. When she did emerge, there would be an air of contentment about her that Brenna could not help but envy. That puzzling sense of fulfillment lay at the center of the mystery she had never before dared to contemplate too closely.

Glancing up, her heart skipped a beat. Guyon D'Arcy was staring at her openly. The thick-fringed

topaz eyes wandered over her hair and face, down the slender line of her ivory throat, to settle on the soft rise and fall of her ripe breasts.

He was leaning back in his chair, the goblet twirled absentedly between lean fingers as he appeared to give his attention to the King. In fact, his mind was firmly engaged elsewhere. Brenna could almost feel those steely hands on her, moving at will over her back and waist to the smooth curve of her hips. She flushed hotly.

Seeing her discomfort, Guyon grinned. The action stripped years from his age, making him look almost boyish. Brenna could not help but stare as before her eyes the relentless warrior was transformed into an undeniably attractive, even charming man.

As though he could read the very passage of her thoughts, Guyon's smile widened. In his look lay a challenge Brenna could not acknowledge. She let her own gaze fall to the table, praying that the evening would soon be over.

Chapter Two

"Have you a full bolt of the cloth? I am not interested otherwise."

"Indeed, my lady," the merchant hastened to assure Edythe. "The bolt is as yet untouched. It should be ample to your needs." Anxious to please, he added, "Few have your discernment."

"Few can afford your prices," Edythe scoffed, but not too harshly. The cloth she eyed was velvet, just beginning to be imported from the East. Thick and lush, the gray-green fabric glowed with a sheen no other could match. Come winter, it would be perfect for a lady's mantle or even, if there was enough, a cloak.

Beside her, Brenna shifted restlessly. She was enjoying her slightly delayed trip to London market, but the bargaining over this particular length of cloth

had gone on long enough to bore her. She couldn't understand why Edythe was so determined to have it. The velvet wasn't even her color.

Sighing, she glanced around for some amusement. At a respectful distance, half a dozen of the Earl Harold's *thegns* kept careful watch. Well-ordered though the market was, there were occasional thefts and drunken squabbles among the tavern patrons. The *thegns* were there to be sure no such event touched their lady to the slightest degree. Should Edythe be at all discomfited or, the Lord forbid, frightened, the Earl Harold would never let them hear the last of it.

They were a patient group, Brenna thought wryly. After a morning spent following the ladies from booth to booth, they looked hot and tired, but nonetheless determined to endure. She couldn't say the same for herself. Licking her lips, Brenna found them dry. She was thirsty, as well as bored. Her cool room back at Thorney, the table piled with new books and clean paper, beckoned. But she could hardly desert her sister, especially when the trip had been arranged at her own urging.

London market, at least, proved everything Brenna had imagined and then some. Never in her wildest dreams could she have pictured the immense array of fabrics, spices, ornaments, household goods, weapons, and livestock spread out among hundreds of flag-bedraped stalls each vying with all the others for attention and trade.

The rhythmic chants of merchants calling passers-by to come view their goods joined the cacophony. Men of all races and creeds swarmed through the market, making themselves understood in a vigorous

mixture of languages through which vulgate Latin ran as the common thread.

From the market, the city reached out haphazardly along crooked streets of hard-packed dirt. Squat buildings of wood and thatch were decorated by intricate carvings meant to give protection against evil. The talismans were Celtic or old Norse, reminding all that even within the sight of London's many churches the ancient pagan ways still flourished.

Open fields within the city provided cropland or fodder. Oxen, sheep, cows, and pigs roamed at will, their droppings mingling with the odors of salt water, bilge waste, carcasses, and river mud to give London its distinctive aroma.

Silently giving thanks for the brisk breeze that kept the stench from settling, Brenna caught her sister's eye. "Do you mind if I look for the scribners's stalls? I've heard they're right nearby."

Edythe smiled resignedly. "Not at all. Go ahead and I'll meet you back at Thorney. But mind, don't be late."

Brenna nodded reassuringly. Her step was light as she hurried away, barely noticing the two *thegns* who immediately detached from the others and followed her. Although the crowd was thick, Brenna moved through it easily. Her rich dress and the watchful presence of two armed men behind her gave silent notice that she was not to be disturbed. Observers presumed her to be kinswoman to some powerful lord or, as beautiful as she was, perhaps a cossetted favorite. Either way, they took care not to jostle or touch her in any way.

She walked speedily enough to almost pass

through the scribners's section of the market without noticing it, it was so small. Only when she was drawn up short by a display of pens did Brenna realize she had reached her goal. Backtracking, she began to browse through the stalls offering paper, ink, illuminating paints, and even a few precious books.

Following her, the *thegns* sighed. At least the section of the market where fabrics were sold offered the chance to watch pretty women busily in pursuit of the latest fashion. Here there was nothing but a few old monks and some pimply-faced scholars. They could only hope she would not linger long, although her interest as she paused before one booth did not bode well.

Busy examining the consistency of a particular ink the merchant claimed would neither clog nor blot, Brenna jumped when a voice near her ear suddenly murmured, "It runs."

She whirled, almost spilling the small jar clutched in her hand as she found herself staring up into the fierce topaz eyes of Guyon D'Arcy. The Norman stood so close to her that Brenna could feel the warmth emanating from his powerful body. Sunlight gleamed on the blond head that towered over her. He was simply dressed in a plain tunic and mantle. A longsword was strapped to his left side with a short fighting dagger opposite it. One large, callused hand rested easily on the dagger's hilt, as though accustomed to being there.

Before Brenna could gather her wits to respond, a shadow fell across the pair. She turned, finding the two *thegns* closing the distance between them, their hands also on their weapons. Quickly, Brenna smiled to indicate she was in no way threatened. The

thegns hesitated, scowling, before they shrugged and returned to their posts. If the lady wished to waste her time conversing with a Norman, so be it.

"W-what did you say?" Brenna stammered when she was assured they would not be interrupted.

"It runs," Guyon repeated amicably, gesturing to the ink. "I tried it myself not two days ago and, despite the merchant's glowing claims, it runs."

The merchant had thoughtfully absented himself. Brenna and Guyon stood alone at the stall. Her fingers trembled slightly as she carefully set the ink jar back in its place.

"I would not have thought you an expert on inks."

"Nonetheless you may believe me," Guyon assured her. "Try the ink and it will spoil your work."

Determined that this time she would not let her fear get the better of her, Brenna forced herself to face the Norman calmly. She even managed to sound faintly mocking as she said, "The merchant promised only that the ink was not too thick. He mentioned nothing at all of its thinness. You would have been wise to inquire, my lord."

Guyon's eyes wandered over her as she spoke, lingering on her flushed cheeks and the ripe lips that trembled slightly under his gaze. Lord, but the girl was beautiful! His impression of the previous day was only strengthened further.

Accustomed as he was to the lovely ladies of Normandy, this girl with her fiery spirit and determined pride touched him in a way he had never before known. It was as though he had stumbled upon the heart of a lion somehow housed in the body of a small, seductive kitten.

Ruefully, he realized he was torn between a desire

to strike out at her for the suspicion he glimpsed in her manner and which puzzled him greatly, and the almost irresistible need to shelter her in his arms, keeping her safe from all danger.

This dual drive both to punish and protect sent his head spinning. It was all Guyon could do to keep his voice steady as he said, "The merchant has an apt defender in you, my lady. I came back today ready to make him eat the page I ruined."

"You are copying a book?" Brenna asked, unable to hide her astonishment. No occupation seemed less likely for a proud Norman warrior whose every word and gesture spoke of strength and will barely held in check.

"A life of Saint Luke," he confirmed, as though there was nothing at all remarkable in this activity. His manner seemed to indicate that every Norman lord preferred to spend his hours stooped over a manuscript desk rather than on the training field or in the dining hall. "It's almost finished. Next month I will present it to the monks at the abbey in my demesne. They have lent me many books from their library, and I feel it only right to contribute to the source."

"You will forgive me," Brenna murmured stiffly, "if I am surprised at your interest. I had no idea many Normans could even read."

"They can't," Guyon informed her, apparently not the least offended by her comment. "But I learned as a child, and have always enjoyed it." There was a teasing glimmer in the topaz eyes as he added, "What about you? Few women read, let alone copy books. How come you do it?"

"Like you, I suppose," Brenna answered honest-

ly. "From childhood, I've borrowed so many books that I feel duty-bound to provide them where I can. Besides, I enjoy the copying. It . . . takes my mind from other things. . . ."

"Like what?" Guyon asked, fingering a stack of vellum.

Brenna looked away. She was all too aware of the heavily muscled arm lying so close to her. The sun-browned skin of his forearm was lightly covered in short, golden hairs. His hands were long and shapely, the nails well cared for. He wore a single ring, emblazoned with a symbol Brenna could not recognize. Searching for any excuse not to answer his question, she wondered out loud, "What does your ring mean?"

Guyon stared at her curiously. He was silent for a moment before he said, "It belonged to my father. The crossed swords with eagle in flight are his family's arms. It was sent to me after his death."

Realizing that she had inadvertently stumbled on a sensitive subject, Brenna bit her lip. She had seen the anger in Guyon's eyes when the Earl Harold brought up the matter of his birth. Would he think her as deliberately rude?

"Forgive me," she murmured apologetically. "I should not have mentioned it." Embarrassed by her lack of tact, Brenna turned away, pretending great interest in a display of quills.

A lean brown hand reached out to take her by the chin. Gently but firmly she was forced to face Guyon. "It is my place to apologize, not yours. In fact I came here today hoping to find you so that I could do just that."

"What made you think I might be here?" Brenna

asked, too surprised by his touch even to wonder what he meant to apologize for.

Guyon smiled. "Yesterday there was an ink stain on your finger. When I learned you had gone to the market, I remembered that. It was unusual enough to make me think you would turn up here."

"Y-you're remarkably observant," Brenna murmured, struggling to hide her embarrassment. If he was that sharp-eyed, what else had he noticed?

"Most men are, at least when it comes to beautiful women. Anyway," Guyon went on, noting the flush spreading over her delicate cheeks, "as I said, I want to apologize."

Catching hold of herself, Brenna asked, "What for?"

Laughter rumbled deep in Guyon's massive chest. He had been right to think she didn't know the rules of the game. But what a pleasure it would be to teach her! "Why for staring at you last evening, of course. I had the distinct impression you were . . . discomfited."

"Not at all," Brenna insisted just a bit too hastily. Inexperienced though she was, she knew perfectly well he didn't really regret his actions in the Great Hall. He was merely using that as an excuse to talk with her. But to what end, she could not imagine.

"Really," Guyon drawled. "Then why did you leave so early?"

"I was tired . . . from the journey. . . ."

Fighting back a smile, he pretended to believe her. "I am relieved to know you were not distressed. Still, I would feel more comfortable if you would set me some task to be sure of your pardon."

Falling into the spirit of his banter, Brenna made a

show of considering this. "My sister is at the fabric market. Perhaps you should come back there with me. You could help pick out colors, consult on styles, match lace and trim. It would all be a great help."

Guyon looked so aghast that she could not help laughing. From his expression, she might have asked him to walk through a wall of fire or stand live target for a volley of arrows. "If that is what you wish . . ." he began morosely, only to be saved by her kind heart refusing to torment him further.

"I but tease you, my lord. In truth, I find such matters as tedious as you seem to." Gazing up at him, she smiled warmly without being aware of how her look affected the Norman. Mesmerized by sparkling gray-green eyes and an enchanting smile, he was having difficulty remembering to breath. Oblivious to his discomfort, Brenna added, "Let us agree that if you can find me a good ink, you will be pardoned. All right?"

Against the tightness of his throat, Guyon muttered, "As you would, my lady." He rapped a hand hard against the wooden stall, summoning the merchant. The man emerged reluctantly from hiding, only to be at once reassured when Guyon ignored his excuses for the poor ink sold earlier and ordered him to bring out the best of his stock at once.

Several inks were rejected for being too thin or gritty. One simply smelled bad. At last, Brenna found what she was looking for, an ink as smooth in texture, as thorough in coverage, and as quick to dry as that mixed by the monks near Winchester. Delighted, she settled down to haggle.

Guyon watched in amusement as she beat the

price steadily lower. From a high of a penny per jar, the merchant finally agreed to part with three jars and a new set of nubs in return for tuppence. Delighted with her bargain, Brenna selected two bright copper pennies from the cloth purse hanging at her belt and gave them to the man. She had rarely paid for any purchase in coin and found the experience much simpler than the usual barter. But some of her pleasure vanished when the merchant promptly insisted he could not sell Guyon ink at the same price.

Daring much because of the easy mood he sensed flowing between the beautiful young girl and the handsome knight, the man insisted, "You can hardly expect me to give you as good a buy as I do such a charming lady, sir. Before her pretty bargaining, I am helpless."

Afraid that Guyon would be angered by such blatant duplicity, Brenna was astonished when he did nothing more than laugh. "Aren't we all, man?" he asked, tossing an extra ha'penny onto the counter. Glancing down at Brenna, he added, "Still I could count the bargain well done."

The two men grinned as though they somehow understood each other. Perplexed, Brenna turned away, only to find Guyon quickly at her side. "There's a stand selling cider not far from here," he said. "Would you like some?"

Brenna hesitated, puzzled by her failure to immediately reject the idea. Always before she had avoided being in the company of any man, other than her father or brothers, if she could possibly help it. But Guyon's presence made her feel content and yet somehow excited at the same time. With a start,

Brenna realized she did not want to end the interlude. His frequent smiles and gentle voice, added to his relaxed manner with the merchant and his interest in books, had all combined to still her fear.

Commenting on how thirsty she was, Brenna allowed as to how cider seemed a good idea. Followed by the *thegns,* they strolled toward the center of the market where food and drink were offered. Along the way, they passed oracles offering to cast horoscopes or tell fortunes, magicians performing marvels for astonished audiences, even a healer who claimed he could pull a tooth, cure the ague, or mend broken bones all with equal skill.

The crowds grew denser and even more raucous as they neared the stands from which tantalizing aromas wafted. Young girls paraded with trays of breads and sweets slung round their necks. Boys turned chunks of chicken and pork over charcoal braziers. In a particularly shady spot, oysters were being shucked. Having finished their cider and returned the mugs, Guyon steered her toward the seafood.

"Do you like oysters?"

Brenna's nose wrinkled. "Cooked, not raw."

"Then you're missing the best part." He laughed down at her. "You can never tell when you'll open one and find a pearl. They turn up in the unlikeliest places."

Frowning at him, Brenna tried to figure out what she was missing in his words. Her attention was quickly distracted by a pile of fresh crayfish nearby. Two old women were turning skewers of the succulent shellfish over a fragrant woodfire. The smell alone was enough to make Brenna's stomach rumble.

Following her eyes, Guyon grinned. "That's a weakness we share. Come on." Moments later, Brenna and the Norman stood side by side, rapidly downing a pile of sweet pink morsels and laughing at each other like co-conspirators. "They will wonder in the Hall tonight why we have no appetite for supper," Brenna warned.

"They will see me ignore the food and presume I ponder some great matter of state," Guyon teased.

"And my sister will worry over my poor appetite," Brenna rejoined, "and tell me once again that I spend too much time with my books."

"Do you?"

Halted in the act of licking a finger, Brenna stared up at him. "Do I what?"

"Spend too much time with your books?"

She looked away, uncomfortable with the question. "That depends."

"On what?" he persisted, his tone too gentle to give offense.

"Some people," Brenna ventured, "don't think it's proper for a young girl to be concerned with ideas. They think we should be interested in nothing more than children and needlework and suchlike." Without pausing to wonder why his opinion was suddenly so important to her, she looked up at him almost imploringly. "You don't think that, do you?"

"No," Guyon assured her. A surge of relief spread through Brenna, only to be abruptly halted as he qualified, "Provided she doesn't shut herself off from the other pleasures life offers."

His eyes were unexpectedly tender as he studied her. "I'd wager you've never even been kissed, have you?"

Brenna flushed painfully. Her contentment with his company vanished. "Of course not! Well-brought up young ladies don't go around getting kissed. That's no more accepted here than in Normandy. Surely you know that!"

A silent laugh quirked Guyon's usually stern mouth. Teasingly, he said, "I know that in Normandy you and I wouldn't be walking in the market like this, not even with your trusted shadows." He shot a glance back toward the two watchful *thegns*.

Brenna's blush deepened. Did he think her poorly behaved because she had agreed to accompany him? Dismay clawed at her. "Then I will take my leave, sir, before I further violate the sense of propriety you so belatedly display."

Guyon was helpless to stop the roar of laughter that broke from him. Trust his lion-hearted kitten to be purring one moment and spitting the next! Catching his breath, he made haste to soothe her. "I meant no criticism of your customs, my lady. Believe me. Allow me to admit that in some ways England is more enlightened than Normandy."

Brenna stared at him uncertainly. She wanted to believe him, but this tall, compelling man filled her with such strange sensations . . . Instinctively, she shied away.

Guyon's hand shot out. Careful not to grip her too hard, he kept hold of her slender arm as he said, "Stay with me, Brenna."

The fervency of his tone startled him. Always before he had viewed women as an amusement to be enjoyed when time and circumstances permitted, or otherwise forgotten. With so much to occupy him at the palace, this was hardly the moment to linger

flirting with a beautiful young girl. Especially not one highborn and gently reared whom he could not expect in all honor to take to his bed. Yet he could not bear the thought of seeing her walk away.

Brenna stared up at him. Seeing the sincerity in his gaze, she hesitated.

Guyon moved at once to consolidate his victory. "Aren't those fresh honey cakes I smell? You can't mean to go off without one?"

Confessing to a special fondness for honey cakes, Brenna gave in gracefully. Moments later, as she licked a crumb of the sweet from her upper lip, all tension had left her. Laughing, she said, "We set a poor example, my lord. Any child watching us would swear that gluttony is a virtue."

Guyon shrugged, a devilish gleam in his eye. "Then I'll have to reform my ways, my lady, since I now have some hope of children in the not too distant future." His words surprised Guyon himself. After all these years of nimbly avoiding a commitment to any woman, why was he suddenly speaking of children?

Brenna was powerless to keep the dismay from her voice. "I did not realize you were married."

"I am not," he said quickly, too puzzled by his own behavior to pursue the subject further.

Then he must be betrothed, Brenna thought. Much of her pleasure in the day vanished as she found herself wondering what the lady was like. Beautiful no doubt, and of good birth. Though he was bastard born, Guyon had clearly risen to great power and wealth. High in the favor of his Duke, he could claim almost any lady as his bride. Whoever she was, she undoubtedly didn't go around with ink

stains on her fingers, chattering about books and pens.

Morosely, Brenna wished she had listened when Edythe tried to give her some instruction on the art of conversing with men. She had dismissed it as beneath her interest, never guessing that she would one day want very much to be thought charming and worthy of attention.

Observing the expressions flitting across the lovely face, Guyon was hard-pressed to restrain a smile. He had a very clear idea of what was going on behind those enchanting gray-green eyes. Innocence and instinct were warring within her, and he savored both.

Taking a deep breath, Brenna told herself to think of Guyon as no different from her father or brothers. Any other feelings he roused in her came too close to the dark center of her fears, and had best to be ignored. Brightly, she began to speak of the court and the delight she was finding in her first visit there.

The sudden shift in her behavior made Guyon frown. One moment it was clear that she was very much aware of him as a man. The next she appeared to treat him as no more than an old family acquaintance. Just beginning to gauge the full extent of Brenna's inexperience, he resolved to convince her there was no need to hold him at arm's length.

Calling on all his diplomatic skills, he soon had her laughing at stories of his own experiences at various courts. He had traveled widely, both for the Duke and himself, and was familiar with places Brenna had only dreamt about. Encouraged by her eager questions, Guyon described his journeys to Paris and Rome, even as far away as the Saracen lands where

he had spent two years amassing the beginnings of his wealth.

When he was once again certain that she was fully relaxed with him, Guyon suggested Brenna allow him to escort her back to the palace.

"In company with your watchdogs, of course," he teased, nodding toward the nearby *thegns*. "I swear they've barely blinked since I came on the scene."

Brenna glanced up at the sun, finding it much farther west than she had expected. "It is late. My sister will be wondering what's happened to me." It surprised her how much of the day was gone. Soon the lords and ladies would be assembling once again in the Great Hall. She really did have to get back.

At the pen next to the market, she and Guyon reclaimed their horses from the *sokeman* charged with guarding them. They followed the river road past the ancient city walls some believed had been built by the Romans mentioned in Holy Writ. Whoever had possessed the skill to pile those precisely hewn blocks of stone one upon the other might also have built the straight roads that crisscrossed England.

Years before, Brenna remembered her father growing curious about the main road that cut through Norfolk. How, he wondered, could anything so well endure the endless traffic of men and carts without showing the slightest sign of wear? On a whim, he set a group of *theows* to work digging up the road. His neighbors watched in respectful amusement, aware that the *reeve* of Norfolk was a good man cursed by an overly inquiring mind.

After three days of digging, he gave up. The *theows* had uncovered layers of flagstones inter-

spersed with gravel reaching down some dozen feet, but they had yet to find the roadbed. Shaking his head in amazement, Brenna's father ordered the excavation filled in and went back to his ledgers. But he never ceased to wonder at the skill and power of the ancients who had built for eternity, only to vanish beyond memory.

As they neared the royal island two miles west of the city, Brenna could see the evidence of King Edward's own striving for immortality. For decades, craftsmen and laborers had swarmed over the abbey that would serve London's west minster. Intended as a monument to the King's godliness, its Norman design complete with fierce gargoyles, weight-defying buttresses, and high-pointed towers did not endear it to the English men and women who watched it slowly rise above the surrounding trees and buildings.

Now that the Abbey was almost completed, it stood taller than the royal residence itself. Built of light-hued stone, the sheer walls punctuated only by slit windows were surrounded by a deep defensive ditch which could be taken as a symbol of the King's distrust of his nobles and subjects. After decades on the throne, the English-born but Norman-reared king was still very much a stranger in his own land. His mother's treachery when she rejected the children of her first marriage in favor of the second's had sent Edward and his brother into exile in the Duchy. By habit and conviction, he still looked to it as the bastion of all that was good.

But was it? Brenna wondered. Though she found her room at Thorney quite comfortable, she greatly preferred the Anglo-Saxon design of her home in

Norfolk and Harold's stronghold at Winchester. Built of native woods, wattle, and thatch, they were far more human in both size and style. No one, Brenna thought, could look on the Norman structures without recognizing their warlike nature. Every house, even every church, was built to withstand siege. She shivered, considering what it must be like to live in such an environment.

"Are you chilled?" Guyon asked, his hand already on the fastening of his cloak. He would have immediately stripped it off and wrapped it around her had not Brenna forestalled him.

"I was just wondering what it must be like to live behind stone walls all the time." Gesturing toward the royal residence, she asked, "Is your home like that?"

"It's not quite as large," Guyon told her gravely, "but yes, the design is similar." He looked at her closely for a moment before adding, "Many women find our keeps quite comfortable. The walls are white-washed and hung with tapestries. They hold back the wind quite well. The floors are stone, but spread with rushes so they aren't too cold. And the rooms aren't as smoky as in English homes. We've started using what we call a 'chimney' to carry the smoke away."

Brenna, who knew well what it meant to cough and tear in a smoke-filled hall, was immediately interested. "What is a 'chimney'?"

"A sort of funnel for drawing smoke outside. It also makes it possible to sit closer to a fire and so benefit more from its light and heat."

"Why don't we have them here?" she asked.

"They have to be built of stone," Guyon ex-

plained, "so they don't catch fire themselves. Since very little stone is used for building in England, they haven't caught on yet. Perhaps they will in a few years. We're really only just getting used to them in Normandy." He laughed, thinking of how poorly some people took any change. "When I built my stronghold, I took care to include several chimneys. Many of my neighbors are still shaking their heads over them."

"I can't quite picture how they work," Brenna admitted, "or why." Her smooth brow furled with the effort. How wonderful it would be never again to have to endure a smoky room, or be unable to get close enough to a fire to fully enjoy its benefits.

"Perhaps you'll see for yourself one day," Guyon murmured. His eyes were suddenly very intent as they studied the slender form sitting so erect on the chestnut mare.

"Perhaps," Brenna agreed politely, thinking there was really very little chance of her ever visiting Normandy. With her move from Norfolk to Winchester, and this trip to London, she had already done far more traveling than almost anyone she knew.

Of course, if she became a nun she might go on a pilgrimage to Rome, or even the Holy Land. Brenna sighed to herself, unwilling to spoil the day with thoughts of the religious vows that seemed more and more a certain part of her future. Guyon's hands, hard and warm at her waist as he helped her dismount, made that prospect no pleasanter.

She bade him farewell, and resolved to spend what time remained before supper in copying out a particularly difficult passage. Surely that task would

soothe her mind and banish her worries. But no sooner did she begin to struggle with the text than a pair of laughing topaz eyes seemed to appear on the blank page before her. She was swept by the remembered sense of him, the warm resiliency of his skin when their hands brushed, the mingled scents of clean wool and burnished leather and manly sweat that he exuded, the deep rumble of his voice when he was amused.

Brenna's pen snapped between her fingers and she cursed in sheer frustration. Something was happening to her that she could not even attempt to understand. She knew only that for the first time in her life she had truly enjoyed the company of a man not her kin.

Staring out the tiny window, she counted the hours to supper and wondered how many more days the Seigneur D'Arcy intended to remain in London.

Chapter Three

STANDING ON TIPTOE TO SEE OVER THE HEADS OF THE crowd, Brenna searched eagerly for Guyon. She knew he and his Norman knights would be taking part in the games, but none of the contestants had yet appeared on the field.

Only a few young boys could be seen raking the ground where the wrestling matches would take place, setting up targets for archery and ax-throwing, and generally making themselves useful. They hollered dares at one another, each boasting of his lord's unbeatable prowess.

Spectators already gathering in the stands egged them on. Odds were being set and wages laid. Betting ran heavily in favor of the English since all the games were Anglo-Saxon. There would be none of the fighting from horseback with lance or

longsword at which the Normans so excelled. Nonetheless, Brenna was certain Guyon and his men could acquit themselves honorably.

Almost overcome with impatience, she bounced up and down on her toes and fidgeted restlessly. Beside her, Edythe laughed. "For Heaven's sake, sit down. They won't be starting for a while yet."

"I know," Brenna sighed, "it's just that . . ." She broke off, embarrassed by her sister's knowing scrutiny.

"Yesss . . ." Edythe drawled. Her bright blue eyes gleamed with mischief. She was greatly enjoying the spectacle of her quiet, studious little sister suddenly eager for the sight of a man. No sport the day could offer would be anywhere near as amusing as the entertainment Brenna had been inadvertently providing all week.

Granted, it had taken awhile to figure out what was going on. At first, it just seemed that Brenna was unusually preoccupied. When she joined the other ladies in the *solar,* it was almost impossible to get a word out of her. She was forever staring dreamily into space or out the window, her expression bemused but happy. Edythe presumed she was thinking about the new book King Edward had lent her. But when she asked Brenna about it, the young girl sheepishly admitted she had yet to open the missive.

About then Edythe began noticing just how constantly Guyon D'Arcy seemed to be around. As was to be expected, he took meals in the Great Hall and put in regular appearances at chapel. Edythe could hardly fault him for that. But he also managed to

drop by the stables when Brenna took a treat to her mare, he turned up in the gardens when she walked there to see the new roses, he even wandered down to the river where Brenna sat to watch the boats go by.

When the court rode out to hunt, Guyon was at Brenna's side. When she expressed a wish to view the abbey construction more closely, he voiced a like desire and accompanied her. When she went back to the market to purchase vellum, Guyon decided he needed some too and went along.

It was all very puzzling, Edythe mused. Not that she was surprised at Guyon's attraction to Brenna. Her sister was a very beautiful and, when she tried, gracious young lady. What did surprise her was Brenna's apparent willingness to be with the Norman. Edythe had never before known her to be truly at ease in the presence of any man save her father and brothers. But with Guyon she was markedly relaxed.

In the stable yard just stirring at the first gray light of dawn, in the gardens perfumed by the afternoon sun, in the Great Hall after supper, wherever they happened to meet, their laughter rang out frequently. The easy companionship that had sprung up between the Norman lord and Brenna provoked smiles from some, but glares from many. The court ladies in particular grumbled at Guyon's obvious avoidance of them. He made no secret of preferring Brenna's company, a sentiment the young girl clearly returned. Edythe glanced at her sister hopefully. Could it be that the past was finally loosing its terrible grip on Brenna?

Not suspecting what lay behind Edythe's regard, Brenna met her smile warmly. "It can't be much longer surely? Not now that the King is seated."

"Oh, I'm certain it will be hours yet," Edythe insisted teasingly. "Perhaps the games will just be cancelled and we'll spend the day in chapel."

Brenna grimaced. Her eyes, as deep and mysterious as a moss-draped pond, fell to her lap. "You mock me."

"Never that," Edythe assured her quickly. Her voice was tender as she added, "I merely enjoy your happiness."

"I am happy," Brenna admitted, vivacity returning. "The court is wonderful. I can't thank you enough for bringing me here."

Edythe fought back a smile. In some ways, her younger sister reminded her of herself years before when she first met Harold Godwinson. She too had been shy of the strange feelings he provoked within her, and frightened by the fiercely male determination to possess that she had unwittingly triggered in him. But her own case had been much simpler. There were no nightmares to detract from the natural progress of desire into love.

Silently, Edythe reminded herself she must speak to the Earl about Brenna. As intelligent and observant as he was, Harold certainly knew of the Norman's interest in his kinswoman. But the question remained of what he intended to do about it. Between Guyon and the Earl there was bad feeling, but of a political rather than personal nature. Since there was no certainty that Brenna's unexpected ease with the Norman could be repeated with another man,

Edythe was loathe to let this chance go by. For her sister's sake, she hoped to work something out. . . .

Edythe's thoughts broke off as the contestants began to take the field. The crowd cheered raucously, their shouts reaching a crescendo as the Earl Harold and his brother, the Earl Leofwine, appeared with their men. Edythe could not suppress the shiver of pleasure that darted through her at the sight of her lord.

Well over six feet tall, his powerful, rock-hard body towered over most of the other men. Dark blond hair hung to his massive shoulders. A short beard and a mustache with long, pointed ends draped on either side of his sensual mouth gave him a dangerously vulpine look. Clad only in a loincloth, it was clear that although he was almost forty, Harold Godwinson remained in the peak condition of a seasoned warrior. His brawny chest was lightly covered by fine gold hairs tapering in a narrow line down his flat abdomen. His long legs were heavily muscled, the corded sinews rippling as he moved.

Without realizing that she did so, Edythe stood up. Their eyes met. The Earl flashed her a grin blatantly evocative of the night they had just spent together. Edythe flushed as the crowd, understanding the look well enough, roared its approval. She hastily resumed her seat, glad that Brenna was too preoccupied to notice her embarrassment.

The younger girl barely noted the presence of her kinsmen on the field as her eyes swept past them, searching for Guyon's tawny head. Her breath caught in her throat and her heart began to hammer painfully against her ribs as she caught sight of him.

Like Harold, Guyon wore only a loincloth, but whereas the sight of her kinsman's near-naked body had no effect on her, Brenna's reaction to Guyon was sharp and acute. She bit her lip to hold back a gasp as a sensation very close to pain stabbed through her. In the clear sunlight of that perfect summer day, he stood—the epitome of masculine beauty. Battle-hardened muscle and long, hard bone moved sinuously beneath burnished skin. From the soles of feet, planted slightly apart in an easy but power-laden stance, to the top of his rugged head turning to scan the crowd, an aura of controlled force hung about him.

Brenna's mouth was suddenly dry. Her small pointed tongue darted out to moisten parched lips. Beneath her thin linen tunic and the fine silk mantle she wore over it, her breasts grew taut, the nipples hardening. An urgent core of warmth began in her middle and spread outward, making her tremble. Swept by alternate waves of heat and cold, she wondered dimly what illness threatened.

Her small hands were clenched white against the railings when Guyon, finding her at last, approached. He stood before her, smiling broadly, oblivious to any presence save hers.

"My lady," his deep voice intoned gently, "in Normandy it is the custom for a knight to wear a lady's favor in tournament. Will you indulge me in this?"

Without pausing to think, Brenna's hand flew to one of the jade green ribbons woven through her long ebony tresses. She pulled it free, tossing it to Guyon who caught it with an easy motion. Topaz

eyes sparkled as he looped the ribbon around the bulging muscle of one arm, tying it carefully in place. His gaze caressed her warmly before he bowed his thanks and returned to the field. Only then did Brenna become aware of the risqué laughter of the crowd. She shrank back in her seat, torn between embarrassment and pleasure so intense that she could not quite force back the smile that curved her lovely lips.

Caught up in a world which at that moment included nothing other than Guyon and herself, Brenna didn't notice the swiftly appraising glance her sister sent her. Nor did she see Edythe and the Earl Harold's eyes meet again, this time with serious intent. Some silent communication sped between them. The Earl hesitated, eyeing the oblivious young girl with a gaze at once indulgent yet perceptive. Understanding dawned as he looked again at Edythe, nodding abruptly before he too returned to the field.

The rest of the morning passed in a daze for Brenna. She was only distantly aware of the startled exclamations from the crowd as those who had bet heavily on the English quickly discovered the Normans were more capable than they had guessed. Guyon and his men might not fight with arrow and ax, but they were skilled enough in their use. Not too surprising when one remembered that although their knightly code prevented them from using such weapons themselves, they were responsible for teaching their use to the foot soldiers who fought with them.

Guyon, it quickly developed, could shoot an arrow straight and true as any Englishman. He and

the Earl tied in the archery competition, the stalemate broken only when Harold managed to splinter the arrow Guyon had sent home straight to its mark. The Norman acknowledged the victory with good grace, only to promptly beat all the English lords, including Harold, in ax-throwing. But it was in the wrestling that Guyon and his knights truly showed their strength. The English were every bit as powerful and agile, yet they could not best the Normans. In every match, they carried the day through sheer determination and stubbornness that kept them hanging on long after any sane man would have given up.

Brenna closed her eyes in horror at one moment when she could no longer bear to witness the punishment Guyon was taking. His opponent was a bull of a man, even larger and more massive than Guyon himself. Three times he lifted the Norman from the ground and sent him hurtling back with brutal force. Each time Brenna started in terror, fully expecting to hear the dreaded crack of a bone. But three times Guyon regained his feet and continued the match. The last time, the English bull shook his head in astonishment. His own legs were at last beginning to buckle and he was unsure how much longer he could hold out against the crazy Norman.

The two men, sweat-streaked and begrimed, circled each other warily. Each was red-faced and panting, but in Guyon's leonine eyes burned the fierce will to win. The Englishman lunged. Guyon neatly sidestepped him and, catching his leg, sent him sprawling to the ground. As the man struggled to rise, Guyon was on him instantly, locking his

opponent's arms behind him and ramming his own knee into the man's back in a way guaranteed to break it if surrender did not come quickly.

Exhausted, the Englishman slumped in defeat. The crowd, partisan though it was, roared its approval. Norman he might be, but Guyon had won the admiration of every man. They knew what it had cost him to continue with the match and though they might privately hope to never meet such fierceness in battle, they could afford to acclaim it on the gaming field.

From the women came a very different sort of admiration. Brenna's small hands clenched into fists as a lady seated just behind her ventured a whispered comment to a friend about the merits of wrestling with Guyon. "That's a sweet combat I wouldn't mind losing," she giggled.

"I'd pay the forfeit gladly," her friend agreed. "Rarely have I seen a man so well-endowed or with such stamina. It's a pity to waste such skills in this arena."

"What makes you think he confines them here?" the first lady challenged, her eyes still wandering over Guyon's powerful body. As he came to stand before the King and accept his congratulations, she deliberately allowed her gaze to linger on that part of him covered by the loincloth which though decent left little to the imagination. "Well-endowed indeed," she murmured thickly.

A cynical smile played across Guyon's handsome features as he deliberately ignored the lady's interest. His eyes softened as they moved on to Brenna. Her damask cheeks were flushed and those gray-

green pools of light he privately thought a man could drown in flashed angrily. Wondering what could have irked her he had to fight down the urge to go to her at once, soothe her temper, and learn what might be wrong. In his present state, he was no fit company for any lady. Reluctantly, he left the field to bathe and dress.

Brenna watched him go with relief. Her own behavior was beginning to frighten her. The court lady's careless words had so enraged her that she had come close to slapping the spoiled harridan's lustful face. Yet at the same time she could not deny that some part of herself echoed the woman's sentiments. Guyon's body moved hers in ways she had never imagined possible. Some force long dormant within her was coming awake, and she was at once exalted and terrified by its first faint stirrings.

Far in the back of her mind, in a shadowy corner too filled with horrors to confront directly, the high-pitched voice of a child screamed a warning. The color drained from Brenna's face. Her hands trembled as the bitter taste of bile rose in her throat.

Edythe, busy talking with the Queen, did not at first realize her sister's discomfort. But when she turned to Brenna with some comment, and saw the dazed expression and trembling, bloodless lips, she reacted at once.

"I knew the sun was too bright to be seated here so long! And without even a headscarf. Come along at once. You're going to lie down and have a cool cloth on your forehead."

As the Queen clucked her sympathy, Edythe led her sister firmly away. Despite Brenna's shaky prot-

estations, she insisted on getting her settled in bed. A serving woman was sent for a basin of cool water with which Edythe bathed the younger girl's face and hands.

Edythe's eyes were dark with worry as she studied her sister. Silently, she prayed that she was right and that her condition was due to no more than the sun. Brenna was normally so self-contained that it was almost impossible to guess her thoughts. It was not in her nature to confide easily in others, but now Edythe tried to persuade her to do so.

"Was it the sun," she asked gently, "or did something else disturb you?"

For a moment Brenna was tempted to try to explain what had happened to her in the stands. But how could she explain what she herself did not understand? Her nebulous fears so bewildered her that she felt she had no choice but to deny them.

"It was the heat," she insisted hastily. "You were right, I should have worn a scarf."

Edythe frowned down at the delicate face so pale against the midnight darkness of her hair cascading across the pillow. She strongly suspected that her sister was not speaking the truth, but she hesitated to challenge her. What if she was wrong? Her questions might trigger memories most certainly better left forgotten.

Sighing, she rose from the bed. "I'll leave you to rest for a while. Try to sleep."

Brenna nodded gratefully. She knew she wouldn't be able to close her eyes, but a few hours alone in her room might at least calm her spirits and prepare her better to face the evening ahead.

Despite her expectations, Brenna did doze briefly before the maid returned to help her dress. She stood quietly as a pure white tunic was slipped over her head, then covered by a scarlet mantle whose silver-embroidered hem matched the beaten silver of her brooches. From the jewelry chest the maid brought with her, Brenna selected wide silver bracelets intricately carved with serpentine beasts of Celtic lore. Through earlobes pierced in childhood, she carefully threaded silver hoops. Deciding to leave her milk-white throat bare, she allowed the maid to weave scarlet ribbons stitched with seed pearls through her hair.

When she was at last satisfied with her appearance, Brenna thanked the woman and turned to leave, missing the maid's amused grin. What a change barely a week had brought about in the young lady. Whereas before she had seemed bored with the whole matter of dress, now she carefully selected colors and ornaments. When she first waited on her, the maid had thought Brenna beautiful despite herself. With the girl finally paying some attention to her appearance, that beauty was magnified ten-fold.

It was no wonder that wherever she went noble lords paused to gaze in lustful admiration and noble ladies ground their teeth in jealous rage. Fortunately for the young girl's peace of mind, she seemed oblivious to the stir she caused. All her attention was focused on the Norman, who was said to return it in ample measure. The maid smothered a sigh of envy. To go a virgin to the bed of one such as Guyon D'Arcy was a delight few women would ever know. What an awakening the girl would have and quite

soon, if the serving woman was any judge of such matters!

The evening passed quickly for Brenna. She and Guyon found a moment for private conversation after he entered the Hall with the Earl Harold. She shyly congratulated him on the day's victories. He graciously insisted the credit went to her favor, without which he could not have won.

Several times during supper Brenna glanced up to find Guyon's eyes on her. Each time he smiled gently and she responded. Her discomfort of the afternoon did not return as she thoroughly enjoyed both the supper and Guyon's company. When the last dishes were cleared away, Brenna sang for the lords and ladies while Guyon accompanied her on the lute. Their efforts were well received with much applause and calls for favorite melodies.

By the time the torches set in brackets throughout the Great Hall began to sputter, Brenna was happily tired. Her cheeks were flushed and her eyes shone over brightly. For all the elegance of her garb, she looked rather like a worn-out child who had played too hard. When Guyon suggested he escort her back to her quarters, she agreed at once. Bidding Edythe and the Earl good night, she was too weary even to notice the look that passed between them and Guyon.

A servant holding a beeswax candle stood ready to accompany them, but saying that it was still light enough to see without aid, Guyon dismissed him. He and Brenna made their way through Thorney's twisting corridors in companionable silence. Guyon held her elbow to keep her from stumbling in the dim twilight, and Brenna did not rebuke his touch. It was

only when they came at last to her door and he took hold of both her arms that Brenna gazed up at the Norman in surprise.

Before she could guess his intention, Guyon drew her firmly but gently to him. His blond head bent as lips, warm and hard, brushed Brenna's. She gasped, and Guyon drew back a fraction, hesitating. But then as though he had reached some decision, his mouth moved on hers again, this time insistingly enough to part her lips.

Swept by astounding sensations she had never before even imagined, Brenna was too stunned to offer any but the most token resistence. His arms were iron bands holding her to his lithe hardness. His powerful head and massive shoulders blocked out all the world. There was only Guyon and the incredible things he was making her feel.

The sun-warmed scent of him filled Brenna's breath. Blood pounded in her ears. Her heart drummed painfully against confining ribs as her knees threatened to give way. Without her being aware of it, her hands unclenched and moved to his back. A soft moan caught in her throat.

Relishing her acquiescence, Guyon deepened the kiss. Parting her lips, his tongue probed gently inward, tasting hidden sweetness. Callused hands moved tenderly down the supple line of her back, caressing the indentation of her waist before moving along the rounded curve of very womanly hips.

Overwhelmed by the sudden release of hitherto unknown passions, Brenna trembled helplessly. A low growl of victory rumbled in Guyon's massive chest as he pressed her even closer to him.

"Your clothing," he murmured into her mouth, "is very deceptive. You have a beautiful body hidden under there."

Pressing her against the wall, his lips trailed fiery kisses down the silken column of her throat. Sharp teeth nipped at her earlobe before his tongue darted out to soothe the minute hurt. Impatient with the barriers of clothing, his hand slipped into her wide sleeve, finding its way beneath the loose pleats of her tunic. A spasm of pure longing shot through Brenna as lean fingers caressed her bare breast, toying with the ultra-sensitive nipple that thrust urgently into his palm.

"You were made for this," Guyon muttered exultantly. "By God, I could take you now!"

His words penetrated the fog of delight engulfing Brenna. Reality pierced like a sword stab, shocking her into full awareness of her vulnerability. Horrified, she struggled against him.

"Let me go!"

Guyon, lost in his own pleasure, mistook her fear for simple reluctance. "Don't worry. I know perfectly well your sister will come looking for you in a few minutes." He laughed ruefully. "At least, my brain knows it. Too bad the message didn't get through to all parts of me." Momentarily forgetting Brenna's extreme innocence, he pressed her to him intimately, making her acutely aware of his state of arousal.

A wave of smothering darkness swept over her. Her throat constricted, stifling a scream of pure terror. Nightmare visions darted through her mind. Swept by terror more profound than she had ever known, Brenna stood paralyzed in his arms. She

could not even struggle against his implacable strength. Every part of her being shrieked that he was going to hurt her, hurt her badly. But she was powerless to make a single sound.

Utterly unaware of the hideous memories stirring within her, Guyon stroked her hair gently. "Soon, my love, soon . . . I can't possibly let you sleep alone much longer."

Brenna was beyond understanding his words or the caring tone in which they were whispered. Lost in a world of stark horror, she couldn't even feel the tenderness of his touch as he reluctantly put her from him.

In the rapidly darkening corridor, Guyon could not see the unnatural hugeness of Brenna's eyes or her ashen face. He knew only that the incredibly lovely girl trembled in his arms and that her breath came unusually fast. Considering his own near-painful arousal, which he already suspected he would be unable to satisfy with any other woman, Guyon thought what appeared to be her own slight discomfort was only just. Soon, he promised himself, I will teach her to need me as much as I need her. Then we will both find the sweetest release in each other's arms.

Had she been anyone other than the highborn kinswoman of an earl, he would never have let her go. It would have been only too easy to sweep her into the privacy of that small, quiet room, there to strip away her clothes as well as her inhibitions, and bury himself deep within the moist warmth of her body. Justly confident of his skill as a lover, Guyon never considered for a moment that he would have

any difficulty awakening Brenna to passion. He knew only that her delectable initiation had to wait.

Sighing, he opened the door to her room and gently pushed her inside. He allowed himself only the briefest of kisses against lips he distantly noted seemed chilled, before Guyon shut the door behind her and walked hurriedly away.

Chapter Four

"I-I DON'T UNDERSTAND WHAT YOU'RE SAYING . . ." Brenna murmured tensely. Perched on a bench in the ladies' solar, she stared at her sister in baffled dismay.

Edythe took a deep breath. She had deliberately drawn the younger girl off into this quiet corner of the solar so that they could have a few minutes alone. The Queen and her ladies, busy with their needlework, were far enough away to allow for private conversation. More firmly, Edythe repeated, "The Seigneur Guyon D'Arcy has asked that you be given to him in marriage. He spoke with the Earl Harold who approves, as does the King. The betrothal documents were signed last night."

She paused, thinking that Brenna must surely understand now. But the luminous gray-green eyes only continued to gaze at her in bewilderment.

Patiently, Edythe continued. "It is a great honor. Guyon D'Arcy is extremely wealthy and powerful. He could have married almost any lady, perhaps even one of royal birth. But he chose you. Moreover, though he listened politely to the details of your dowry, it was clear that was not what interests him." She smiled reassuringly. "Few women can go to marriage as certain that they are truly wanted by their husbands. You're very fortunate."

"Fortunate!" Brenna choked, comprehension at last burning through her. Outrage lent a strident note to her normally soft voice. "To be sold off to a man I barely know! Without anyone bothering to ask what I think of the arrangement! Fortunate!" Her slender shoulders shook as unshed tears made her throat ache. "How could you do this? I thought you cared for me, that I could trust you!"

"But you like Guyon!" Edythe sputtered in astonishment. Surely she could not have misread the signs of her sister's affection for the Norman. "You've been with him almost constantly this last week, and never with the slightest complaint. I've seen how your face lights up when you see him, how relaxed and happy you always are in his presence. When it was clear he returned your feelings, I was overjoyed!"

Struggling for some small measure of composure, Brenna clenched her small hands tightly. "I do like Guyon," she admitted tremulously. "But as a friend, not . . . not anything else. I didn't know he felt like that about me until last night. . . . Oh, God, last night!"

Tears coursed unheeded down her pale cheeks as she remembered how carefully she had hidden her

dismay when Edythe came to check on her. Somehow she found the strength to keep her sister from seeing the terrible effect Guyon's kisses had on her. Only after Edythe left did she dissolve into terrified sobs, spending the night sitting bolt upright in bed, afraid to sleep lest the nightmares come to claim her mind entirely. Bitterly she cursed the stubborn pride that kept her from admitting the truth. Edythe had gone away believing everything was all right, with her betrothal the horrifying result.

Carefully blocking her sister's huddled body from the sight of the other ladies, Edythe tried frantically to soothe her. "Brenna, believe me, the Earl Harold and I want only what is best for you. Guyon D'Arcy is a good man who cares for you deeply. He'll make a wonderful husband. You'll see. . . ."

"No! I don't want a husband! I've never made any secret of that. You always knew I would rather take religious vows than marry. Why, oh why, couldn't you have just asked me?"

"But you aren't suited to the religious life," Edythe protested. "You're a warm, loving girl. You're meant to have a home and family of your own . . . children . . ."

"No!" Brenna shook her head vehemently. "I can't . . . I just c-can't. . . ." She choked on the words. Even in the midst of her shock and fear, she was all too well aware of how different things might have been. If only she was like other girls, secure in themselves and looking forward to marriage, then the news Edythe brought would have delighted her. To be Guyon D'Arcy's wife . . .

The thought alone was sheer torment. Forcing it from her mind, Brenna repeated, "I can't go

through with this. The betrothal will have to be cancelled."

Edythe's deep blue eyes opened wide. So stunned was she that she barely managed to mouth the word. "Cancelled?"

"It's the only way," Brenna insisted firmly. "We'll just have to tell Guyon that we're sorry but there was a misunderstanding."

"You don't mean that!" Edythe exclaimed, acutely aware of the seriousness of what Brenna was suggesting. Contracts of any kind, but especially those involving marriage, were never lightly revoked. The mere hint of any such action would cause profound embarrassment and bad feelings on both sides. Moreover, the Earl Harold had given his word, a sacred bond never broken. The King himself had enthusiastically approved the marriage. There was no end to the horrors Edythe envisioned if she couldn't make her younger sister see reason.

"Of course I'm serious. There's no choice!"

"You don't realize what you're asking," Edythe began in a desperate effort to calm her. "This marriage has great diplomatic importance. The union of our house with Guyon D'Arcy's could mean a better chance for better relations between our two people. But if the contract is revoked, the opposite will happen. There will be great anger, quite justifiably. Perhaps," she added hesitantly, "Guyon could be persuaded to delay the marriage . . . to give you some time to adjust to the idea. . . ."

"No! All the time in the world won't make the slightest difference. This marriage is a terrible mistake and it has to be stopped now!"

"Brenna, it's natural that you're a little fearful. All girls feel that way. But . . ."

The last thing Brenna wanted to discuss were her fears. They were far too close as it was. Flatly, she said, "You're not going to help me, are you?"

Sorrowfully, Edythe shook her head. "I can't. There's simply too much at stake, and anyway I think you're wrong. This marriage is right for you."

Brenna ignored that last statement. Gathering all her courage, she looked her sister straight in the eye. "Then I must speak with the Earl myself."

"Y-you don't mean to . . ." Edythe spluttered.

"To tell him I will not go through with the marriage and that he must call it off."

No one, absolutely no one, ever told the proud Harold Godwinson what he must do. Occasionally, he bowed to expediency and did things he didn't particularly care for. But never would he tolerate such effrontery as Brenna was planning. Shocked by the mere thought, Edythe struggled fervently to dissuade her. "Be reasonable, Brenna . . . that isn't the way to handle this . . . let me get my thoughts together, see what might be done . . . perhaps in a few days . . ."

"When does Guyon expect the marriage to take place?" Brenna demanded.

"R-right away," Edythe admitted.

"Then I must see the Earl at once." Rising, she smoothed the skirt of her tunic with hands that trembled. "Where is he?"

"On the training field," Edythe muttered in despair. She jumped up as her sister moved away. "Wait! I'll go with you."

Together the two women left the solar, ignoring

the startled looks of the Queen and her ladies. Brenna sped down the narrow staircase and through the Great Hall to the bailey. She wanted no time to think. Words, explanations, pleas tumbled through her mind. Surely the Earl could be made to understand that what he contemplated was impossible. In the little contact she had with him, he had always been gentle and kind. But Brenna did not lie to herself. Beneath his congenial manner, Harold Godwinson possessed an iron will and ruthless determination against which even the fiercest lords of England quailed. How could she, a mere girl, hope to sway him? Feeling very much as though she was going to her own execution, Brenna lifted her skirts clear of the mud and searched for her kinsman.

He was standing a little to one side, talking with a grizzled *thegn* responsible for the archery training. Brenna noted briefly that he seemed in a good mood, was even laughing. But his smile faded as he spied her hurrying toward him with a grim-faced Edythe close behind.

"My lord," Brenna murmured respectfully, "would you allow me a moment to speak with you?"

A flick of the Earl's hand was sufficient to dismiss the *thegn,* who scurried quickly away. His piercing gray eyes flitting from Brenna to his lady and back again, Harold demanded, "What concerns you?"

"My betrothal to Guyon D'Arcy," Brenna blurted, thinking it better to come to the heart of the matter at once. "I do not wish to marry him."

For a moment the Earl simply stared at her as though unable to believe what he had just heard. Extreme displeasure was stamped clearly on his arrogant features. Swallowing hard, Brenna kept her

gaze focused on the broad chain of beaten gold stretched across the Earl's powerful chest. She did not raise her head as, addressing Edythe, he said grimly, "I had understood, my lady, that this union was desired by *both parties.*"

Edythe shifted uncomfortably before him. She was not afraid of the Earl, for in fifteen years he had never treated her with anything other than gentleness and loving passion. But she had seen his temper directed at others enough times to dread such an outburst now. Hurriedly, she said, "Brenna has some idea that she would prefer to take holy vows, my lord."

"Is this true?" he barked, a hard hand forcing Brenna's head up.

"Y-yes," she gasped, finding it difficult to breathe under his fierce scrutiny.

"You believe you have a vocation?"

"I . . ." Brenna could not lie. She knew she was not one of those rare individuals truly called to the service of God. But she was also fully aware that such men and women made up only a tiny portion of the cloistered population. Most others were there simply because they did not care for the secular life, or had no place in it. "I do not wish to wed, my lord," she managed at last. "Not Guyon D'Arcy or any man. I mean no disrespect to you or him, but I cannot honor the contract."

"*You* cannot!" the Earl repeated harshly. "That contract is between D'Arcy and myself. As your kinsman and guardian since your father's death, it is my right to dispose of you however I see fit."

Brenna flushed angrily. What the Earl said was

true, but did he have to make her sound like a side of beef up for barter? "My cooperation is still required," she snapped, "and that I will not give!"

Before her brave defiance, the Earl merely laughed. Grimly, he informed her: "Your cooperation is far from essential. Guyon D'Arcy will wed *and bed* you whether or not you approve!"

"My lord!" Edythe broke in hastily, seeing the color drain from Brenna's face. She sent a hasty look of pleading at the Earl who, seeing it, was reminded of what he should not have forgotten. Relenting very slightly, he muttered, "Brenna, this marriage is best for you. Believe me. You will shortly come to understand and accept that." More sternly, he added, "But in the meantime, you will accept my will. The contract is signed. Two days hence you become Guyon D'Arcy's wife."

Afraid to look at her kinsman again lest she say something truly unforgivable, Brenna kept her head mutely bowed. She could hear Edythe speaking placatingly to the Earl, assuring him that Brenna would be brought around. But the words barely registered on her fevered mind. Swamped by despair, she knew only that she had been a fool to believe her wishes would prevail over any man's. To her kinsman, she told herself bitterly, she was nothing but a possession to be bartered away. And to Guyon . . . The memory of his kiss and the barely leashed passion she had sensed within him flooded back, making her tremble.

To Guyon she was merely a womanly body he desired to possess. One which would give him both pleasure and children. That she also brought with

her beneficial political ties was an added inducement, but she had no doubt where his interest mainly lay. Guyon would expect her to fulfill her obligations as his wife completely and without the slightest resistance. Not that there would be any hope of denying him. As the Earl had pointed out, the seasoned warrior would take her whether she wished it or not.

Never! Brenna vowed fiercely. *He will never get the chance to hurt me like that.* Forgetting all the happy, relaxed times with Guyon, the easy companionship they enjoyed, her ready acceptance of his friendship, Brenna knew only that she would not, could not, submit to his possession. Before her terrible fear of what that entailed, all other considerations vanished.

Numbly, she allowed Edythe to lead her away. Back in her room, seated on the narrow bed, she listened silently as her sister pleaded and coaxed and finally just insisted that she accept her fate gracefully. "There are dozens, maybe hundreds of women," Edythe insisted, "who would joyfully trade places with you. Not one would hesitate for a moment to be Guyon D'Arcy's wife. But he's chosen you. Oh, Brenna," she entreated, "can't you see it's for the best? Guyon is a kind man. He will not hurt you."

Edythe hesitated, wondering if she should say more. Perhaps this was the time to bring Brenna's fears out in the open, to talk plainly of them and to explain exactly why she should not dread marriage to Guyon. Though she had lain with no man but the Earl, Edythe was certain her sister's betrothed would be a gentle and patient lover. Faithful to the

core of her being, she was still woman enough to have heard and appreciated the comments about his prowess. This was no callow boy who would be rough or unfeeling, but a skilled, experienced man who knew full well how to bring a woman to the peak of exquisite pleasure. If only Brenna would entrust herself to him . . .

About to say something of this, Edythe was prevented when Brenna murmured, "I am sorry for the trouble I've caused. Surely the Earl will not hold you responsible?"

In her present state, fearing and distrusting all men, she truly worried that Edythe might suffer physically for her actions. It was by no means unheard of for women to be beaten or otherwise abused by their husbands, without the slightest recourse. If she had brought such punishment down on her sister . . .

Seeing the woebegone look in the younger girl's eyes, Edythe instinctively sought to comfort her. "Don't worry about me. The Earl's anger flares swiftly, but dies just as fast."

Somewhat reassured, Brenna nodded. "That is good. After all your kindness to me, I would not like to think I brought you trouble."

There was a note in the younger girl's voice that made Edythe frown. If she had been less worried and better able to concentrate, she might have recognized the hint of finality and farewell. But Edythe's mind was in turmoil as she struggled to determine how the marriage could be brought off without further disturbance.

When Brenna suggested she would like to lie

down and rest for a few hours, her sister agreed at once. The younger girl's apparent calmness relieved her, and she was certain that with a little time Brenna would see her only sensible course was to go along with that which was already arranged. She left Brenna lying on the bed, lightly covered by a soft wool blanket with the shutters closed against the morning sun.

No sooner did Edythe step from the room, shutting the door behind her, than Brenna sprang into action. Jumping from the bed, she hurried to the chest holding her clothes. An older but sturdier mantle replaced the silk one she had donned that morning. The soft slippers she wore were discarded in favor of sturdy leather boots. A woolen cloak went around her shoulders, the hood pulled up to hide her luxurious hair.

Bundling a few more belongings into the purse hanging from her belt, Brenna hurried to the door. She opened it just a crack and peered outside. The corridor was empty. She could hear nothing but the distant sounds of household servants moving about and the shouts of men on the training field. Taking a deep breath, she ran lightly down the hallway, not pausing until she reached the stairs.

There she hesitated. In the narrow, winding confines leading down to the Great Hall, she would be unable to hide herself from anyone who happened to pass by. If recognized, her presence would certainly not be thought remarkable. But her dress would arouse curiosity. A careless word uttered in the wrong ear and pursuers would quickly be after her.

Hardly daring to breath, Brenna moved slowly

down the stairs. She hugged the curving stone wall, listened intently for any sound that would send her fleeing to the relative safety of the passageway. By the time she at last reached the bottom, she was trembling and her heart beat painfully.

It was easy enough to lose herself in the shadows of the Great Hall. She was certain no one noticed as she flitted through, slipping out a side door that led to the stables. Her mare was in the usual stall. The horse whinnied a greeting, but was quickly shushed by Brenna. Talking soothingly to the chestnut, she breathed a silent prayer of thanks to her father who had insisted his daughter learn for herself how to saddle and bridle a horse. When the last girths were tightened, Brenna slid easily onto the mare's back.

Ducking her head under the low beam of the stable door, she took a last quick glance around. At this hour, the grooms were in the tackle barn polishing leather and gossiping. Confident her departure went unnoticed, Brenna urged the little horse down the path leading to a little-traveled back road.

There was no doubt about which direction to take. Only one refuge remained to her—the convent at Wilton where a distant kinswoman of Brenna's served as abbess. She had stayed at the convent several years before when her father finally gave in to her desire to learn more about the difficult art of illumination. Over several months of study, Wilton had become a dear and familiar place.

Brenna visualized it as she rode along, taking comfort from the thought of sturdy walls of rough-hewn stone protecting neat fields and orchards.

Wilton was very much a world unto itself. Completely self-sufficient, the convent precincts included far more than just the abbey itself. A good-sized village of spotless conical huts housed the lay workers. From many doorposts hung special badges signifying the resident's status as tanner, shoemaker, herdsman, tailor, or other of the many occupations required to keep Wilton running smoothly. Some little distance from the village stood the barns, stables, and hennery, far enough away for cleaniness but still convenient to easy reach.

At the center of the estate, as at the hub of a wheel with many spokes, stood the abbey. Built about a century before, its somber stone walls, thatched roof, and high bell tower were a beacon to the ideals of sanctity and sacrifice. The women who dwelled within devoted their lives to an endless round of prayer, work, and most importantly to Brenna, the copying of books through which knowledge might spread.

Protected by the special favor of the Queen and made wealthy by numerous endowments, Wilton enjoyed a high degree of independence. The holy sisters managed their own affairs, both secular and religious, without interference from London, Canterbury, or Rome. More than anything else, that independence and the freedom it suggested, attracted Brenna. She could hardly wait to be once again safe within Wilton's high stone walls, from which not even the Earl or the King himself would be able to drag her.

Spurring the little horse to a trot, she joined the main road leading west. Even at this early hour,

traffic was already heavy. But most was going in the opposite direction, toward London and the Court. Only a few merchants, their carts heavy with trade goods for the outlying villages, were moving in the same direction as Brenna. She joined the thin stream anxiously, aware that it couldn't be much longer before her absence was noted and the chase begun. Her hope rested on the likelihood that pursuers would head for Norfolk, believing she would return home. By the time they learned that was not her route, she counted on being well within Wilton's sanctuary.

The hours passed slowly. Brenna stopped twice to rest and water the mare, but each time she was too anxious to pause very long. As the road ahead grew emptier, a new fear joined her dread of pursuers. Without escort, she was vulnerable to attack by robbers or even worse. Regretfully, she wished she had stayed her hurried pace and remained within the shelter of some merchant's train. Surrounded by other people, there would be some protection. Alone, with night fast approaching, she had none.

Bravely telling herself that England's roads were safe under the King's peace, Brenna forced her weary body onward. Accustomed though she was to long periods in the saddle, the tension of her escape and her frantic speed had combined to exhaust her. Her back throbbed and her shoulders slumped. As mile succeeded weary mile, she began to think longingly of rest. If she could only lie down for a few minutes . . .

A copse of trees appeared around the next bend. Brenna drew rein. In the rapidly growing dusk, she

relished the peaceful sense of solitude. Only a few birds fluttered their wings in the arching oak trees. A small spring bubbled nearby. The ground beneath her was soft and inviting.

The mare whinnied longingly, spurring Brenna to a decision. She would stop for a few hours, continuing when the full moon was high enough to light the road. Prudence required that she leave her saddle in place, but she was at least able to rub the chestnut down and lead her to a particularly verdant clump of grass before lowering her own exhausted body beside the stream.

Cupping cool water in her hands, Brenna bathed her face and drank eagerly. Her escape from Thorney had been so swift that she gave no thought to provisions. Her stomach growled hungrily. Realizing that it would be some time before she ate again, Brenna took comfort from the fact that recent rainfall had filled the many streams and rivulets between London and her destination. At least she would not go thirsty.

Stretching out full-length beneath one of the massive oak trees, she stared up at the sky dreamily. In the sheltered glen, so far from the intrigue of the court, it was possible to forget there was anyone else in the world. She seemed to drift out of all time and place. Her fears, the Earl's threats, the confusing sensations Guyon aroused in her, all faded before the serenity of fragrant moss and the distant chirping of a nightingale. Sighing softly, Brenna slept.

The mare's frightened snorting woke her. She sat up quickly, uncertain how much time had passed. A swift glance at the moon riding high above the tree

branches told her she had slept much longer than intended. The shadowy silhouettes of men moving among the ancient oaks warned of the seriousness of her mistake.

Praying that she would somehow go unnoticed, Brenna slid soundlessly to her feet. She huddled against the gnarled trunk. Her gray cloak blended well with the bark and she pulled it more securely around her. Nearby she heard the deep voices of men and their sudden exclamation.

"What's this, a fine horse left out to roam?"

"Not roam, dolt. Can't you see she's saddled?"

"Where's the rider then?"

The chestnut reared as her bridle was seized. Men slipped from their own mounts to inspect the prize. Brenna heard a low whistle. "Look at how she's rigged. That's a woman's horse."

"Aye, a lady by the look of it."

"Riding alone?"

The same thought must have occurred to several of the men at the same time. Steel clanked in the still night air as weapons were pulled free. They glanced round warily, seeking any sign of an escort.

"Perhaps she was thrown some distance from here."

"And the horse left to run free?"

"Maybe her people were too busy carrying for her to go after the mount."

Someone snorted doubtfully. Hard hands moved over the mare, seeking clues. Hearing frightened whinnies, Brenna dared to peer round the tree trunk. What she saw fulfilled her worse fears. Half a dozen men stood in a circle around the chestnut. In

the bright moonlight she could clearly make out their dress. Tattered tunics matched oddly with well-cared-for weapons. Landless *thegns,* Brenna thought in terror. Men who through some failure of honor had been disbarred from service to their sworn lord. Left to roam without position or purpose, most had no choice but to leave England in search of some place where they might start again. It was likely the group before her was planning to take ship from London or one of the ports further south. Along the way, these embittered, violent men wouldn't hesitate to take full advantage of anyone too weak to defend against them.

Hoping that the chestnut would hold their attention for at least a few more minutes, Brenna looked around desperately for some means of escape. As the moon slid behind a cloud, she ran from the shelter of the oak tree to another further away. She had almost reached it when a shout warned she was seen. Heavy feet sounded behind her as the renegade *thegns* chased their new and far more welcome quarry.

Running faster than she ever had in her life, Brenna sped deeper and deeper into the copse. She gave no thought to her direction, knowing only that she had to get away. Her heart was threatening to burst through her ribs and her breath came in tortured gasps when a steely hand lashed out to grab her. Thrown hard against the ground, Brenna was momentarily too dazed to struggle. Hauled to her feet and dragged into the full moonlight, she was conscious only of the gleeful laughter of the men as they studied their prize.

"By God, look at that! A beauty!"

"Sweetest looking thing I've ever seen! What's she doing here?"

"Who cares? She's here and so are we. Let's make the most of it!"

The men grunted in quick agreement. They closed in around Brenna as her cloak was ripped from her. One of the renegades grabbed her from behind, holding her helpless as the others surveyed her lustfully.

"Look at that hair and skin! I bet none of us ever touched anything so soft!"

"Get that mantle off her! Let's get a closer look."

Spurred by sheer terror, Brenna fought desperately, lashing out with her feet and trying to bite the one who held her. Against the *thegn's* iron strength, her struggles were no more than the flutterings of a frightened bird. Laughing harshly, a rank-smelling, foul-breathed assailant tore the mantle from her body, leaving nothing but the thin tunic to shield her nakedness.

Brenna screamed as savage hands closed over her breasts, squeezing brutally. She tried again to kick her attacker, and did manage to land a blow to his shin. The man cursed, striking her hard across the face. Brenna's head lashed back, slamming against the massive chest of the man holding her. He adjusted his grip so that both her hands were held by one of his. The other passed slowly and hurtfully down the delicate curve of her waist to fasten cruelly on her buttocks.

Another scream broke from Brenna before her

throat constricted in panic. Barely able to breathe, she was rammed between the two men. The one in front continued squeezing her breasts, twisting the nipples painfully and grinding himself against her until Brenna whimpered in agony. Behind her, the other *thegn* had pulled up her tunic, baring her slender white thighs which he pawed brutally as he rubbed himself against her softness. Around them, the other men shouted encouragement and exortations to haste.

"Hurry up! We all want a turn."

"Spread her on the ground and get on with it!"

The man in front grinned wolfishly. "The other lads are so impatient, what do you say we have her together?"

The second renegade was about to agree when one of the other men objected. "You'll tear her in two, you do that. Then what good will she be to the rest of us?"

"You split her too much," warned another, "we won't be able to sell her. Plenty of brothels in London would pay good for her, but not if she's bleeding too bad to work."

Brenna barely heard them. With her nightmare visions coming to life before her, she was sinking further and further into an abyss of pure terror. Reason, courage, hope all dissolved before the horrifying truth. She had fled from the possession of one man only to be raped by many.

Her skin was icy cold and her breath no more than shallow pants as she prayed for unconsciousness. Let death itself take her before the nightmare

become full reality. Anything was preferable to that.

In the next instant, Brenna was abruptly thrust back to awareness. Her eyes flew wide open and her heart, which had been barely beating, began to hammer frantically as the night was pierced by a blood-chilling roar. The sound, more horrifying than anything a mere animal could produce, ricocheted off the treetops, tearing at the very fabric of the air and panicking her assailants.

They froze in place, too stunned even to reach for their weapons. Tension-filled seconds passed during which it seemed only Brenna was aware of the swift approach of pounding hooves.

Again the roar broke through the night, this time recognizable as a battle cry. Out of the darkness of the oaks, rode a warrior astride an immense black stallion. Across the knight's massive arms and chest chain mail gleamed dully. He wore a helmet, the visor lowered. In his left hand, he grasped a shield, its emblem obscured by darkness. Brenna had a moment to wonder at the strange twist her nightmare was taking. Then all thought fled as moonlight bathed a naked shaft of steel and death galloped into the circle of her fear.

How easily a man can die, Brenna was to think much later. One moment her brutal assailant was standing before her, his face a hideous mask of rage and terror. The next moment he continued to stand just where he had been, but minus his head which, severed by a single swipe of the warrior's sword, bounced dully down the hillside.

Brenna screamed as blood, hot and sticky, gushed

from the pulsing stump. With sickening slowness the lifeless body crumbled to her feet. It was quickly followed by another. The *thegn* behind her was almost rent in two by a savage blow that cleaved his chest and sent his entrails spilling from him.

The remaining renegades, realizing it was hopeless to try to fight afoot, dashed for their horses. Whirling his stallion, the warrior followed. Two more fell before the others managed to mount and challenge him on more equal terms. The clash of steel rang out, but only briefly. Brenna had barely time to take a breath before the last of her attackers toppled lifeless from their saddles to lie unmoving on the blood-soaked ground.

Reining in his charger, the knight approached her with measured steps. Accepting the impossibility of flight, Brenna stood unmoving. Her ebony tresses cascaded over shoulders partially bared by the brutal mauling of the *thegns*. In the moonlight, her skin glowed like translucent alabaster. Through the thin tunic, the womanly curves of her soft body were clearly visible. Her eyes, wide and unconsciously pleading, stared up at the warrior as he stopped just inches from her.

The horse's lathered breathing mingled with the sound of her own frantic heartbeat as Brenna waited to learn her fate. She flinched as a steel-gloved hand reached down to flick away a silken strand of hair obscuring the ripe curve of her breasts. A mailed finger, cold and hard as death itself, lingered against her skin.

"Beautiful," the knight muttered thickly.

Pride crumbled before an implacable will Brenna

knew instinctively was far more dangerous than the brutal violence she had just escaped from. Drawing breath to plead with him not to hurt her, the words died in her throat. The knight had raised the visor of his helmet. Trembling uncontrollably, she stared into the merciless eyes of Guyon D'Arcy.

Chapter Five

"I AM BEGINNING TO SUSPECT," GUYON MUTTERED coldly, "that you are more trouble than you may be worth, my lady."

All the strength went out of Brenna's legs. She sank to the ground, shaking in profound relief. "Thank God it's you!"

Dismounting with easy grace, Guyon sneered at her derisively. "Don't be in such a hurry to thank Him, madam."

In the aftermath of her terrible fear, his warning was meaningless. Brenna knew only that Guyon had found her, protected her. She had never felt safer or more grateful. Dazedly, she whispered, "If you hadn't come when you did, I don't know what would have happened. . . ."

"You would have been raped," Guyon said flatly. He pulled off his gloves and helmet, running a hand

through short tawny hair as he stared down expressionlessly at the girl kneeling before him. Her fragile beauty and vulnerability appeared to leave him completely untouched. There was no softening in his manner as he ordered, "Get up."

Brenna gazed at him in confusion. Why was Guyon being like this? Why wasn't he comforting and reassuring her? He had a right to be angry, she admitted ruefully. But couldn't he see that she had already been more than adequately punished for running away from him?

"Guyon . . ." she began, her hand instinctively going out to him.

He ignored the gesture, and the plea for understanding implicit in her manner. Angrily, the knight repeated, "Get up!"

Sensing that this was not the time to argue, Brenna got slowly to her feet. She tried hard not to look at the surrounding carnage. The smell of blood hung heavy in the air, making her tremble. The face she raised to Guyon was ashen, the eyes wide and luminous with frightened tears.

Once again, she tried to placate him. "Please, don't be so angry. . . ."

"Angry!" he echoed harshly. "Madam, you truly have no idea of my anger." Ominously, he added, "But you will, I promise that!"

Leaving her clutching the thin tunic tightly around her, Guyon went to secure his mount and Brenna's chestnut. She watched as he quickly removed both saddles, rubbed the horses down, and made sure they were within easy reach of grass and water. Her eyes widened as he took a blanket from his saddlebag and tossed it on the ground, then unbuckled the

wide leather belt holding his sword and laid it close at hand. Crossing his arms over his broad chest, he stripped off the chain mail, before turning back to her.

"Come here."

Brenna stared at him uncomprehendingly. This was not the Guyon she had known all the last week. The laughing, gentle man who told her stories about the wide world, discussed books with her, and made her feel at ease and happy with him was changed beyond all recognition. Before her stood a ruthless, brutal warrior utterly incapable of compassion or mercy.

Biting her lip, Brenna frantically told herself things were not always as they seemed. Beneath the cold, relentless mask he now wore, the Guyon she remembered must still linger. If only she could reach him.

On legs that felt as though they had turned to lead, Brenna moved slowly toward the implacable knight. She stopped a few feet away, unable to take another step under the piercing topaz eyes devoid of all feeling. Her head lowered, hands clenched before her, she struggled to control the quivering of her slender limbs.

"Get undressed."

Brenna's head shot up, eyes wide with shock. "W-what?"

"Unless you want the last of your garments torn from you," Guyon grated, "take it off now. Otherwise, you will return with me to Thorney tomorrow naked as the day you were born!"

Instinctively, Brenna stepped back. This couldn't

be happening to her! Surely Guyon didn't mean to . . . "Y-you can't," she whispered fearfully. Realizing the futility of flight, she still couldn't prevent a quick glance over her shoulder. But before she could move another inch, she was seized in a grip of iron that threatened to crush her very bones.

"I can't do what, Brenna?" Guyon challenged mockingly. "Lie with you? Be assured, I can do that and anything else I choose! The betrothal documents are signed. You belong to me as surely as you will after the priest has blessed our union. And I, my lady, am in no mood to wait for holy sanction to claim my rights!"

As though it sickened him to touch her more than absolutely necessary, Guyon thrust her from him. Brenna landed hard against the trunk of a tree, where she crouched like a cornered animal. All hope that she might yet be able to reason with him fled as Guyon snarled, "No one does what you have done to me and goes unpunished. You mocked my honor and profaned our union! Never in my life have I encountered such a willful, disobedient woman. But that will change, my lady, and swiftly! Where I would have taken you in gentleness, it will now please me greatly to force your submission!"

Untying the laces of his tunic, Guyon advanced on her menacingly. "Fight me all you will, Brenna. The more you struggle, the better satisfied I will be." A sneer distorted his handsome features as he trailed a callused finger down the delicate line of her cheek. Brenna flinched beneath his touch, bringing a harsh laugh from Guyon. "You will have to become accustomed to my handling you, my lady. By morning

there will not be an inch of your delectable body I have not known. The blood of your lost virginity will only begin to wipe out the stain to my honor."

He stood only inches from her, his breath warm against her ashen skin. She could see the rippling muscles lightly covered by his tunic, feel the implacable strength radiating from him. Hopelessly, Brenna realized this time there would be no rescue. It was Guyon who would make her nightmare a reality, and when he did something inside her would die forever.

Numbly, she heard him insist, "I meant what I said, Brenna. Unless you wish to be displayed naked before the entire court tomorrow, remove your clothing!"

Some vital part of Brenna seemed to be falling down a deep, endless well, spiraling further and further away from the brutality of what was happening to her. What was left behind had the appearance of Brenna, but very little more. It was as though a stranger accepted the inevitability of what Guyon meant to do to her, a stranger lifted trembling hands to unfasten the tunic, a stranger slid the pleated linen from her body to feel the cool night air touch her naked limbs. Brenna herself felt nothing, except a sadness more profound than death itself. Silent tears trickled down her pale cheeks. She mourned as much for the gentle, noble Guyon she had briefly glimpsed as for all that she had not yet dared to dream.

At the sight of her loveliness, Guyon could not suppress a gasp. She was even more beautiful than he had suspected! Never in his life had he beheld

such perfection in any woman. Her skin was flawless ivory, her body delicate yet so ripely curved as to send flames searing through his loins. Beneath the tumult of her lustrous midnight hair and beautiful features, the slender column of her alabaster throat gave way to fragile shoulders and slim, white arms. The deep indentation of her tiny waist made the curve of her breasts and hips all the more provocative. Her legs were long and shapely, separated by a tangle of dark curls into which he ached to delve.

In the cool night air, Brenna's nipples hardened reflexively. Guyon's heated gaze drifted to them. It was all too easy to imagine how the rosy peaks would feel within his mouth, under the gentle persuasion of his tongue.

Only the lingering memory of her betrayal forced him to act harshly. Holding her by the arms, Guyon yanked her over to the blanket and pushed her down. He followed quickly, half-covering her body with his own, a sinewy thigh thrown over both her legs to hold her immobile. His hand moved leisurely to savor the fullness of her breast. The tawny silk of his hair brushed against her cheek as he lowered his head to suckle her.

Guyon had meant to make his every touch bruising and every caress an insult. But he was powerless to stop his response to Brenna. Even as his loins burned and his manhood throbbed, he could not hurry his possession of her. This was no well-used whore to be roughly tumbled and forgotten. Beneath him lay an achingly beautiful child-woman who did not yet begin to suspect her power over him. He longed to taste every inch of her satiny skin, to feel

her move against him with desire as potent as his own, to hear her first sweet cries of surrender and fulfillment.

Though he still raged against the insult she had done him by fleeing from their marriage, Guyon asked himself if this was truly how he wanted to start their life together. Did he really want to initiate her into womanhood with terror and pain? The memory of that would linger forever between them, a legacy of mistrust and resentment that might never be overcome.

Yet she deserved to be punished, he told himself fiercely. The shock and desolation he felt when told of her flight were still too acute simply to be forgotten. Reminding himself of that, he allowed his teeth to close sharply on her nipple. A soft whimper broke from Brenna.

Guyon relented at once. Against his worst instincts, his touch became coaxingly gentle. His mouth took hers tenderly, parting her lips to allow his tongue to explore the warm, honeyed recesses. Moving over her carefully, his hand caressed the satiny curve of her hip and thigh. As he stroked her passionately, he trailed a line of fiery kisses clear to the base of her throat and the sweet hollow that might have been fashioned to receive his lips. His hands gently kneaded her breasts, fingers tenderly teasing the nipples before being replaced by his hot, moist mouth. Arching her hips against his hardness, Guyon applied the first tentative pressure to part her legs. When Brenna still offered no resistance, he looked up puzzled.

Her eyes were open, staring emptily at the waning moon. The deep gray-green pools were the only

color in her otherwise ashen face. Her skin was chill as snow. Her body was limp, as though all life had fled from it. He could barely make out her shallow breathing and slow, almost imperceptible heartbeat.

Very rarely had Guyon D'Arcy ever known true fear. From childhood he had become inured to savagery and death. Yet the sight of Brenna's near-lifeless form spurred terror more profound than any he had ever so much as glimpsed.

Sitting up quickly, he drew her with him, rubbing her arms and back to warm her. Softly, he murmured, "Brenna, I didn't mean to frighten you this much. I'm not going to hurt you."

Nothing. She might have been miles away for all the response she gave. More urgently, he tried again. "Brenna! There's no reason to be so afraid. I couldn't really harm you. Brenna, listen to me!"

Still nothing. Now deeply worried, Guyon shook her hard. He had seen this state a few times before among men who after days of brutal battle withdrew into themselves, simply unable to endure anything more. Left like that, a man would not eat or drink, and could eventually die.

Cursing himself for a brutish idiot, he wrapped the girl's slender body in the blanket, cradling her tight to his chest. Over and over he murmured reassurances that he was sorry for so frightening her, that she would not be hurt. At last, to his great relief, Brenna's eyes closed. She drifted into what he prayed was a natural sleep.

Laying her down tenderly, Guyon quickly gathered wood for a fire. When it was burning brightly, he moved her closer to the warmth. Fetching water from the nearby spring, he gently washed away the

marks of tears on her pale face. For a time after that he simply sat watching her, somewhat comforted by the slow rise and fall of her breasts under the blanket. Still far too worried to rest himself, he considered what else might be done to aid her recovery from his stupidity. Concerned that she would be distressed upon waking to find herself naked, he fetched her tunic and gently unwound the blanket.

The sight of bruises inflicted by the renegade *thegns* on her breasts and hips made Guyon wince. His fury with himself increased as he realized that in his angry lust he had completely forgotten the fear she must have experienced at the hands of those other men. If any had been left alive, he would gladly have killed them then. As it was, he calmed enough to realize it would do Brenna no good to wake to the sight of bodies strewn about. Adding more wood to the fire, he left her just long enough to drag her attackers' remains out of sight. Peasants in the neighborhood would strip off their clothes and wolves would finish the rest. He felt no hesitation about denying them Christian burial. Too often Guyon had seen the horror men like that could inflict on helpless women. He considered their fate well deserved, even as he painfully wondered just how much better than them he really was.

Returning to the fire, he eased Brenna back into his arms. She was sleeping deeply now, some slight color returning to her cheeks. Stroking her silken hair tenderly, he leaned back against the broad trunk of a tree and settled down to wait out the night.

Shortly before dawn, Brenna began to stir.

Guyon, who had been barely dozing, came instantly awake. Ready to reassure her the moment she returned to consciousness, he was surprised when her eyes opened but remained unfocused, as though her gaze was directed inward to some scene hidden from him.

Within his gentle embrace, her body tensed. Her head tossed from side to side as she moaned softly. "No . . . d-don't . . . don't hurt my mother . . . p-please . . ."

Guyon leaned forward, startled by her voice. This was not the soft, melodious tones he knew from her but the high-pitched whimper of a frightened child.

"Not my mother . . . No! You hurt the others . . . not her! Let her go . . . please, let her go . . ."

Realizing that she was trapped in some nightmare, Guyon spoke to her urgently. "Brenna, wake up! You're dreaming. There's nothing to be afraid of. Wake up."

"What are you doing! Why are they screaming? Let them go! Please . . . so much blood . . . Let them go!"

"Brenna, wake up! It's only a dream!"

"My mother! Don't! Run! Momma, run! Don't let them catch you! They'll hurt you like they did the other women! No, don't fall down! Run! No . . . let her go! Oh, God, please make them let her go!"

Frantically, hating himself for doing it, Guyon slapped Brenna lightly. "Sweetling, wake up! It's only a dream. For God's sake, wake up!" He grasped her even closer, soothing the red mark his hand had left with tender lips, rocking her back and forth as he struggled desperately to reclaim her from whatever nightmare had her locked in its grip.

"So many of them! Why are they all around her? What are they doing to her? Momma, why are you screaming? They hurt her! God, make them stop!"

Brenna was sobbing hysterically, tears pouring from her sightless eyes. Every word, every gesture was that of a terrified child helpless to prevent whatever horror was being played out before her. Equally helpless to penetrate the prison of her mind, Guyon could only hold her tightly, trying to pour his own strength into her and hoping desperately that she would somehow return to him.

"They went away, Momma," Brenna whimpered after a time. "It's all over. You can get up now . . . let me help you." Slender hands moved in phantom motions. "Your clothes got mussed . . . I'll pull them down. It's all right, Momma. You can get up now. Momma . . . ?"

A high, terrified scream tore through the night. Brenna sat bolt upright in Guyon's arms. "Momma! No! Not you! Get up . . . oh, please Momma, get up! I'll be good, I promise. I won't hide in the stable loft anymore. I'll do whatever you say. Please, get up!"

For the first time in his life, Guyon felt the hot wetness of grief against his own face. His tears mingled with Brenna's as full awareness of what she was suffering struck him. Torn by compassion for the helpless child locked in the vulnerable woman's body, and rage at the savage cruelty years distant yet still fresh within her memory, he could do nothing but hold and caress and soothe her through endless, tortured moments.

At last some measure of Guyon's desperate com-

fort must have reached her for Brenna slowly quieted. The child's voice died away. The heartbroken sobs faded to soft moans and finally to a single, wrenching whimper as her body went limp against his.

Even then, Guyon did not release her from his tight embrace until he was certain she had returned to deep sleep. Convinced at last, he still would not completely relinquish his hold but kept his arm wrapped round her slender shoulders and cradled her head to his chest.

In that way, they passed the remainder of the night until, as the first faint rays of dawn touched the eastern sky, Brenna truly awoke.

She sat up slowly, clearly dazed and uncertain where she was. Guyon made no attempt to stop her. He merely waited for her to become aware of his presence. When she did, painful color suffused her delicate cheeks and her thick lashes flew down to hide her eyes.

"G-Guyon . . ." she stammered, fear making her throat constrict.

Careful to make no move that would increase her alarm, he smiled gently. "Good morning."

The softness of his voice surprised her. She looked up hesitantly. "G-good morning . . ."

"It looks like a fair day. Whoever said England had the balmiest summers spoke the truth. We should be back on the road soon. But first, are you hungry? There's bound to be something in my saddlepack." Rattling on about ordinary, inconsequential things, he opened the pack and pulled out a neatly wrapped bundle of dried beef and crackers.

"I've eaten so much of this it actually tastes good to me now. I hope you won't mind it too much." Breaking off a piece, he held it out to her.

Brenna stared first at his hand and then at Guyon's face in bewilderment. Beneath the blanket clutched tightly around her, she could feel that she was dressed. Her body ached, but she knew that was because of the mauling by the *thegns*. She certainly had no feeling of having been raped. Had that terrible scene with Guyon been nothing more than a strange dream? Baffled, but undeniably hungry, she reached out a trembling hand to accept his offering.

Guyon sighed silently in relief. If he could only keep her calm and at ease with him, he might yet have a chance to regain her trust.

"There's a stream down there," he said after a time, "if you'd like to wash up before we leave."

Brenna nodded absently, still struggling to remember what had happened to her the night before. She had no difficulty recalling the brutal renegades and how desperately they had terrified her. She remembered Guyon riding out of the trees, fighting with the men, killing them. . . . He had been very angry with her. She flushed, realizing for the first time how very hurt he must have been by her sudden disappearance. But he had come after her. . . .

"How did you know which way I'd gone?" she asked softly.

"You'd mentioned the convent at Wilton. I knew you had spent some time there and I had the impression you'd been happy among the sisters. So, when we realized you were missing, it occurred to me that you might have gone back there."

"Yet you came alone," Brenna remarked thoughtfully. "Didn't the others believe I'd go there?"

Guyon shook his head. "The Lady Edythe thought you would head for Norfolk, to your brothers. The Earl sent a dozen *thegns* in that direction." He laughed gently. "I wonder how long it will be before they give up and turn back?"

Brenna ducked her head, thinking of all those men put to so much trouble. "The Earl must be furious."

"He was more worried than angry," Guyon assured her. Gently, he added, "Surely you realize now how much danger you put yourself in? An unescorted woman traveling around the countryside is an open invitation to all sorts of things."

"I know," Brenna murmured self-consciously. "I just didn't stop to think. If I had . . ." She looked up, meeting his topaz gaze bravely. "I would at least have had the sense to dress like a boy."

Guyon laughed heartily, partly from sheer amusement at the thought of this lovely, infinitely feminine creature trying to disguise herself as a male and partly from relief that her spirit was returning. More seriously, he asked, "Why did you run away, Brenna?"

He already had a large part of the answer, possibly more than Brenna herself possessed, but Guyon wanted to hear from her own lips what had prompted such extraordinary and foolhardy action.

She shifted uneasily within the blanket, the remains of a half-eaten cracker forgotten in her hand. "I . . . I was very surprised that you wanted to marry me. I had no idea that you thought of me that way. We haven't known each other very long, but I

guess I should have made it clearer to you how I felt about such things."

"And how's that?" Guyon asked, gently holding her eyes with his own.

"I'm not suited for marriage, Guyon," she insisted with such obvious sincerity that his heart went out to her. Brenna clearly believed what she said. Whether or not she understood the reasons for her fear of marriage, she truly thought that part of life was closed to her.

"I just wouldn't be a very good wife," she went on, gaining courage from his quiet attentiveness. "If I belong anywhere, it's in a convent such as Wilton, studying and doing holy works. . . ."

"Far from men and everything we imply?" Guyon deliberately kept his voice very gentle so as not to frighten her. He hoped she would understand that he spoke sympathetically, rather than in anger. Yet careful though he was, Brenna still stiffened.

"I'm sorry if I misled you," she murmured, eyes firmly on the slim hands clenched in her lap. "You have every right to be upset."

"I was angry yesterday," Guyon admitted, "when I learned you were gone. In fact, I think I concentrated on being angry so I wouldn't be overcome by worry about what might be happening to you."

Brenna nodded, knowing what it was like to focus intently on one feeling in order to block out others less tolerable. "But you aren't angry now, are you?" she asked tentatively.

"No," Guyon assured her, "I'm not angry any more."

A small sigh of relief escaped her. Some of the tension went out of her slender body. She wiggled

slightly under the blanket, getting more comfortable. Shyly, she murmured, "Guyon . . . last night when you found me . . . I don't really understand what happened . . ." Her face flamed before the impossibility of asking what he had done to her. Her fragmented memories were so sharply at odds with the gentle, understanding man facing her as to seem utterly unbelievable. Yet she could almost swear that Guyon had threatened her mercilessly, even said that he was going to force her to submit to him. She sensed he was a man who, once set on a course of action, was not easily swayed. But at the same time, her every instinct confirmed that he had not hurt her. Bewildered, she looked up at him again, silently pleading for some explanation.

Guyon swallowed hard. He was grateful that she didn't seem to clearly remember his stupidity. Carefully, he said, "I behaved badly last night, Brenna, because I was so angry and worried. And because I didn't understand . . ." He broke off, knowing it was too soon to confront her with all he had learned. Reassuringly, he added, "But nothing happened that you need to be concerned about."

Brenna flushed, realizing he was telling her she was still a virgin. Relief darted through her, undercut by a startling streak of disappointment. Perversely, she wondered if Guyon had lost all interest in her. Unable to stop herself, she asked, "Then is it your intention to escort me on to Wilton?"

Guyon stared at her for a moment, aching to take her in his arms and soothe away all her fears. But he knew that couldn't be, not yet. There were still a few questions that had to be answered and, just as importantly, Brenna needed time to come to terms

with her fate. Quietly, he said, "No, we will return to Thorney together."

"But Guyon . . ." Brenna began in protest before the look on his rugged face stopped her. His expression said clearly that he would not change his mind. She had no choice but to return to court with him, to face her sister's disappointment and the Earl's wrath.

Dreading the confrontation that was to come, Brenna got slowly to her feet. She flushed when he insisted on replacing the blanket she clutched with his own cloak, but was glad that he at least turned around while she hastily made the change. Watching him in the brief moment that Guyon stood with his back to her, Brenna realized that he was listening acutely for any hint of her attempting to flee. She had no doubt that such an effort would be completely futile. Guyon D'Arcy would not again allow her to escape him, of that she was certain. Whatever happened to her now would be by his will alone. But what that might involve, she dared not guess.

Chapter Six

"He didn't hurt you?" Edythe whispered the question as she embraced her sister tightly. Gratitude for Brenna's safe return had dissolved her anger. Protectively, she put herself between the pale, exhausted girl and the two stern-faced men who watched them. If only there was some way to deflect the Earl's rage and, even more critically, Guyon D'Arcy's. But skilled though she was in the handling of men, Edythe could find no solution. What Brenna had done demanded severe punishment. Only the Norman's unexpected discretion had so far prevented a major scandal involving both their families and the King himself.

Tactfully bringing Brenna through a back entrance of Thorney, Guyon had led her directly to the private quarters shared by the Earl and his lady. By

so doing, he avoided public exposure of their differences at least for the moment. How amused the court would have been by the sight of the proud, arrogant Norman disdainfully returning Brenna to her kinsman. Edythe shuddered at the mere thought of such a scene. What her sister would suffer was bad enough without adding such profound humiliation.

Gently easing Brenna onto a nearby bench, she kept an arm around her slender shoulders. After two days of almost constant riding and very little sleep, the younger girl trembled with weariness. She and Guyon had spoken little on the trip back to Thorney. He seemed lost in his thoughts, and she was reluctant to intrude on them. It was likely he was deciding exactly what to demand in recompense for the insult she had done him. A spark of resentment flared in Brenna as she considered the unfairness of it all. To be punished for trying to take control of one's own life seemed the height of injustice. But whereas the day before that resentment had boiled over into impulsive, near-disastrous action, she was now too exhausted and apprehensive to do more than wish things were somehow different.

Though she had no way of knowing it, Brenna was not alone in that wish. Across the room, arms folded across his broad chest, the Earl Harold stood silently scowling. His fierce look was deceptive. Inside he was urgently trying to come up with some way of mollifying Guyon that didn't involve physically hurting Brenna. He had never in his life knowingly harmed a woman. Other men might think nothing of doing so, but for them the Earl felt only disgust. Beginning with his beautiful, loving mother, he nurtured a deep admiration for women who coura-

geously faced an often dangerous world without the physical strength men relied on. He found the Lady Edythe's bravery, especially during childbirth, nothing short of awe-inspiring. It provoked in him a powerful sense of protectiveness which, he had to admit, extended to her sister.

Beside him, Guyon waited quietly. He was sensitive to the play of emotions going on within the Earl. A few words would have been enough to banish the other man's concern, but Guyon refrained from uttering them yet. He wanted to be absolutely sure that by the time he did so there would be no will left to object.

At last the Earl sighed deeply. He refused to look at either Edythe or Brenna as he said, "I can ask your pardon for my kinswoman's shocking behavior, but I have no illusion you will consider that sufficient."

Silently, Guyon shook his head. The two women moved closer together on the bench. Edythe sent her lord a pleading glance, which he studiously ignored. Slowly, he said, "I propose to send Brenna back to Winchester at once. She will remain there under guard. The usual activities she enjoys—reading, copying books, riding, gardening—will be denied her. She will spend her time in prayer and menial labor."

Breathing a silent prayer that the Norman would realize just how dismal such an existence would be to the vivacious, intelligent young girl, the Earl asked hopefully, "Is that agreeable to you?"

Guyon looked at Brenna then. He was hard put not to smile at the rebellion in her eyes. What spirit the girl had! After all she had been through in the

last two days, she was still fighting. But at least she seemed to have acquired some discretion. Her mutinous expression said clearly that she would much rather be beaten than endure what the Earl was suggesting. But only a slight gasp escaped her when Guyon declared, "No, my lord, that is not at all agreeable to me."

"Damn it, man!" the Earl exclaimed. "What do you expect me to do with the girl? She's hardly the sort to benefit from a good thrashing, if that's what you're thinking." His glare defied Guyon to insist Brenna should be whipped. Political considerations notwithstanding, the Earl was determined not to allow that.

Crossing the room to stand before Brenna, Guyon looked down at her gently. She met his gaze for just an instant, before lowering her eyes. He took in the pallor of her face, the slight quiver of her shoulders, and knew the time had come to speak.

Softly, he addressed the Earl. "You signed the contract of betrothal giving Brenna to me. I expect that contract to be honored."

"What!" the Earl and Edythe exclaimed together.

"Our marriage will take place tomorrow, as planned," Guyon went on calmly. "Nothing else will satisfy me."

"But you ca-can't," Edythe sputtered. "Not after what happened. You mean you still want to?"

"Brenna and I will be married, my lady," Guyon explained gently but with unmistakable firmness. "She will return with me to Normandy, where we will live as man and wife. What happened yesterday will be forgotten."

The Earl was staring at him in astonishment.

Being not unfamiliar himself with the nature of sensual desire, he had understood full well that the Norman wanted Brenna badly. But not until that moment had he realized just how much. To possess her, he was willing to overlook a grave insult to his name and honor. Profoundly relieved, Harold Godwinson smiled. "If you wish it, my lord, of course the contract will be honored."

Unable to believe what she was hearing, Brenna stared from one man to the other in shock. Surely, Guyon couldn't be serious. He couldn't possibly still want to marry her after she had . . . Rising slightly from the bench, Brenna murmured dazedly, "Guyon . . . You can't mean . . ."

Crossing the small distance that still separated them in a single stride, he took both her hands in one of his. Her skin was cold and he could feel her tremble. Fighting down the urge to take her in his arms there and then, Guyon said, "You are exhausted, Brenna. Go to your chamber and rest."

Large gray-green eyes gazed up at him in utter bewilderment. She would have spoken again, but he forestalled her. So softly that only Brenna could hear him, Guyon whispered, "Everything will be all right. Trust me."

Brenna hesitated a moment longer before abruptly nodding. Her own acceptance surprised her. Telling herself it was only complete exhaustion that made her willing to leave the matter in Guyon's hands, she went quickly from the room. Outside a *thegn* waited to escort her to her chamber, where she would slip gratefully into her narrow bed and hope for dreamless sleep.

When the door closed behind her, Guyon turned

back to the Earl and Edythe. Quietly, he said, "I believe you have something to tell me, my lord and lady."

Two hours later Edythe walked down the corridor Brenna had traversed earlier. She nodded to the *thegn* now guarding her sister's door before carefully easing it open. Inside, she gazed down tenderly at the sleeping Brenna. Kneeling beside the bed, Edythe reflected that never would she have expected to feel such thankfulness to a Norman. But to Guyon D'Arcy, her gratitude knew no bounds. Now he knew everything and, God be praised, he seemed to understand. What he would do with the knowledge remained to be seen. But of one thing Edythe was certain: he would not deliberately harm Brenna. In his hands she would be safe, so much so that she might actually be able to throw off the past and come to the full realization of her womanhood. Praying silently that it would be so, Edythe slipped from the room. There was much yet to be done before the next day's wedding feast.

Brenna woke on the morning of her marriage to Guyon D'Arcy to the song of larks perched outside her window. She sat up slowly in the bed, stretching luxuriously. For a moment her mind refused to register anything except that she was well rested and curiously happy. Then memory flooded back and she frowned. Had Guyon actually meant what he said about marrying her? In light of what she had done, that seemed impossible. Yet the suspicion lingered that he was serious.

Intent on discovering the truth as quickly as she could, Brenna jumped from the bed. She hastily

pulled on a robe before opening the door of her chamber. It was her plan to send a serving woman for Edythe. Surely her sister would tell her what had happened after she left the Earl's quarters.

The sight of the burly *thegn* standing stoically outside her room brought Brenna to an abrupt halt. She had no need to ask what he was doing there. It was only too clear. There would be no opportunity for her to escape a second time. Fuming, Brenna retreated back inside her room, slamming the door behind her. Her fists clenched as she heard the *thegn's* chuckle. He was certain of what was going on, even if she wasn't!

Brenna was still sitting in stiff fury on the bed when the serving woman entered. She glanced at the young girl sympathetically. Never mind that she had won a few pence in the servant's hall by wagering this one would be quickly wed. The girl appeared pale and ill, she needed looking after. Gently, the woman said, "I've brought a bath for you, my lady."

"I don't want it," Brenna snapped. She'd be damned if she'd clean and perfume herself for Guyon D'Arcy!

"A nice, warm bath," the woman repeated soothingly, "then breakfast. And my lady, I've brought the most beautiful clothes you've ever seen." Her eyes glowed. "Such fine fabric and the colors! They're not to be believed." Gently easing the girl from the bed, she chattered on, "You'll be the most beautiful bride ever, believe me! This wedding will be talked about at Thorney for a long time to come."

Grimly, Brenna wondered if she dared to make the woman's prediction an ironic reality. Did she have the courage to stage a scene no one at the court

or anywhere else would ever forget? She knew that nothing was required of her at the marriage ceremony except to stand passively while the priest blessed the union. But if she were to voice her objections, make it clear she was an unwilling participant . . .

No sooner did the idea occur to Brenna than she rejected it. Innate good sense told her she would be hurting herself far worse than anyone else. Moreover, she would betray her sister, who deserved far better from her. Resignedly, Brenna allowed the serving woman to lead her to the tub. She lowered herself into the warm water obediently, but balked when the woman began to wash her. That she would do for herself.

The pleasure of the bath temporarily eased Brenna's anxiety. She relaxed enough to enjoy the interlude. Only as the serving woman toweled her dry did her tension return. Though she managed to stand quietly under the maid's ministrations, inwardly she trembled. The next time she stood naked in a room it would not be women who saw her. She would be alone with Guyon, her husband, who would have the right to do anything he chose with her.

Fighting down the taste of bile in her throat, Brenna allowed herself to be dressed. She was only dimly aware that the saffron tunic the maid slipped over her head was of the most finely spun linen she had ever seen. Every part of the tunic that would be left bare by the covering mantle was delicately embroidered in shimmering gold thread. The mantle itself, made of luxurious indigo silk, was as elaborately ornamented. Many highly skilled needlewomen must have labored long hours to achieve such

remarkable effects. As she moved, the garments seemed to come alive, molding to her delicate curves and heightening the alabaster sheen of her skin.

The brooches used to hold the mantle in place were beaten gold set with pearls and rare sapphires brought from the East. On her small feet went fragile slippers dyed to match the saffron tunic. Through her hair, the serving women wove silk ribbons of indigo and saffron before adding the bride's traditional fresh flowers. Oil of jasmine was touched to the pulse points of her throat and wrists, the scent surrounding and dazing her.

A maid held the mirror for Brenna. She gazed into it unseeingly. Nor did she hear the admiring comments of the serving women or note their envying glances. When Edythe entered, she found her sister standing silently in the center of the room. The younger girl's blank look, arms held limply at her side and eyes unfocused, filled her with concern. Anxiously, she said, "Are you all right, Brenna? Have you eaten? It will be a long day, you really should eat."

Edythe relaxed slightly as her sister calmly assured her, "I'm fine. No, I didn't eat, but I did have some milk. That was plenty. Thank you for the beautiful garments. I could never have imagined any so lovely."

Smiling now as she became more convinced that Brenna was in full control of herself, Edythe nodded warmly. "They were made for me, as you might guess. There was no time to have special garments done for you, but these suit you perfectly." Generously, she added, "They would not do me half as well."

"You're too kind to give them to me," Brenna said. "I will return them to you afterward. . . ."

"Certainly not!" Edythe insisted. "Every woman should keep the robes in which she is wed. You will wear them again on particularly happy occasions." Touching the younger girl's arm gently, she added, "I know you will, Brenna. There will be many happy times with Guyon."

Brenna didn't want to think about the Norman. It was all too easy to conjure up his handsome, rugged features and powerful body, all too tempting to remember what it felt like to be pressed against his hardness, to feel the thirsty demand of his mouth on hers. Such thoughts led inevitably to images of the coming night, and that Brenna could not bear. Quickly, she asked, "Are we to go now?"

Edythe nodded slowly. She had the strong feeling that her sister was holding herself severely in check, as though fighting against some almost irresistible urge to panic. Taking her arm gently, Edythe could only pray the younger girl's self-control would last. There was the wedding mass and dinner to get through, not to mention the bedding itself. Wishing fervently that it was all over and done with, Edythe led the way down the corridor.

The royal chapel was crowded. Edward and his Queen heard mass every day, and more often than not at least a part of the court joined them. But this day every inch of space within the small stone sanctuary was taken. Lords and ladies jostled one another good-naturedly. Word of what was to occur had spread rapidly and no one wanted to miss it. When Brenna entered, a murmur went up from the crowd. The men could not suppress their admiration

for her beauty, just as the women could not stifle a sigh of envy for one so fortunate.

Brenna didn't hear them. All her attention was focused on the task of following Edythe to the front of the chapel. She kept her eyes lowered, fastened onto her sister's swaying skirt just ahead of her. Some portion of her mind registered the presence of the Earl and his close scrutiny of her. Far more acutely she felt Guyon's nearness, knew that his eyes moved over her slowly, missing nothing.

Not daring to look at him, Brenna stood numbly throughout the mass. Behind her, the lords and ladies waited for the liturgical finale with poor patience. Mass they could hear anytime. The union of two great families was something else again. Eagerly, they anticipated the moment when the priest would step forward to bless the marriage.

All too soon, it seemed to Brenna, the Earl was taking her hand in his. She was led, gently but implacably, to stand before the altar. Guyon joined her there. He was magnificently dressed in a crimson tunic and doublet, finely spun chausses, dark leather boots, and a dress sword even more elaborate than that which she had seen him wear before. Heavy gold bands glinted at his wrists, evoking memories of the ancient Norse heritage shared by both English and Norman. Across his chest stretched a gold chain pierced at the center by a single blood-red stone that looked, to Brenna's tremulous glance, like the eye of a fierce beast. Shivering, she turned away, glad of the distraction offered by the priest.

Well aware of the importance of the occasion, the priest made a good job of it. His blessing was lengthy and eloquent. He reminded his audience of Christ's

role at the marriage at Cana, and went on for some considerable time about the holiness of such unions. Brenna could not help but recall the very brief blessings of other marriages which, tacked on almost as an after-thought to a regular mass, were deemed sufficient to the Church's sensibilities and purposes. If nothing else, she reflected ruefully, she and Guyon would be well and truly wed. The priest left no turn undone before at long last joining their hands and sprinkling holy water above their heads.

Engulfed in the congratulations of the court, Brenna managed to keep her thoughts from the tall, rather somber man at her side. Although he did not touch her again, Guyon remained close at hand throughout the procession from the chapel to the Great Hall where a celebration dinner waited.

Seated next to him at the royal table, Brenna listened to a seemingly endless round of toasts wishing the new couple well. She relaxed slightly when attention was finally diverted from them by the arrival of jugglers, musicians, and food. Some indication of just how much King Edward approved this marriage came through in the elaborate presentation of dishes. Each of the palace's many cooks had clearly vied to surpass the others. Brenna quickly lost count of the different versions of beef, fowl, game, seafood, vegetables, cheeses, eggs, and bread paraded before her. She accepted only the smallest servings of a few dishes and ignored her wine goblet altogether. Guyon, she couldn't help but notice, also ate and drank sparingly. He spoke to her from time to time, always some perfectly ordinary remark about the meal or the entertainment, and Brenna

managed to answer sensibly. But she could not deny the rapid pounding of her heart or the trembling in her limbs as the day began to fade and the moment she would be left alone with Guyon drew inevitably nearer.

When Edythe caught her eye, signaling that it was time to leave, Brenna froze in her seat. For a moment, she truly doubted the ability of her legs to hold her should she try to stand. Then pride came to her rescue and she rose quickly, turning a deaf ear to the ribald shouts that accompanied her exit.

Once outside the Great Hall, habit caused her to turn in the direction of her own room. Edythe's hand on her arm stopped her. Brenna flushed at the silent reminder that she would be sharing Guyon's chamber. Not trusting herself to speak, she followed Edythe and two of her ladies down the corridor.

The accommodations given to Guyon D'Arcy were every bit as luxurious as those shared by Edythe and her Earl. Easily three times the size of Brenna's room, the chamber was richly furnished with vibrant tapestries, intricately carved tables and chairs, and an immense bed hung with a brocaded canopy and curtains.

A single chest of clothes and some writing materials left out on one of the tables were the only signs of Guyon's occupancy. Otherwise, the chamber was meticulously clean and neat. Fresh rushes lay on the flagstone floor, interspersed with fragrant herbs and dried flowers. Highly polished braziers stood ready with untouched charcoal which, in view of the warm weather and most probable activity of the room's occupants, was not likely to be used. Smooth linen

covered the down-filled mattress and bolster. Across the foot of the bed lay a lace-trimmed gown, the transparency of which made Brenna whiten.

Obeying Edythe's gently murmured instructions, she lifted her arms to ease the removal of her mantle and tunic. The ribbons and flowers were plucked from Brenna's hair and the thick ebony tresses brushed smooth. Shivering slightly, she washed her hands and face in a basin of warm water. Edythe dropped the gown over her head as the ladies turned back the bed covers.

Sliding into the huge bed, Brenna pulled the covers up to her chin. Huddled with her knees bent and her eyes luminous with unshed tears, she looked like a frightened child. Edythe's throat clenched painfully as she sought in vain for some way to reassure her sister. At least, she thought gratefully, this wasn't Normandy with its atrocious custom of publicly bedding the bride. Brenna's precarious self-control would undoubtedly have snapped had she been forced to stand naked before not only Guyon but members of the court as well. It would be bad enough in the morning, when the delegation arrived to confirm that the marriage was in fact consummated. Pray God that it would be, Edythe breathed silently, and that Brenna would not find the experience too distressing.

Noises in the corridor alerted her to the approach of Guyon and his escort. The door was flung open, allowing the boisterous lords to enter with much shouting and laughter. Few had been as abstemious as Guyon in their enjoyment of the ale and wine. Even the King was flushed and jovial, and the Earl had a positively devilish look in his eye

which told Edythe plainly that she for one would get little sleep that night.

Smiling ruefully, she patted the covers around Brenna, leaning close enough to whisper, "Do everything that he says, and I am certain Guyon will not hurt you." She had to be satisfied with the merest flicker of a response from the young girl, who stiffened further and did not speak.

Sighing, Edythe stepped aside to allow the lords a clear view of the bed. They had just enough time for a few sincere comments about the willingness of any man there to take Guyon's place before he was quietly but firmly ushering them out.

Brenna was never quite sure how he managed it but within minutes the door closed on the last of the escort and she was alone with her husband.

Chapter Seven

GUYON TURNED AWAY FROM THE DOOR TO REGARD HIS wife. He was vividly aware that she had never looked more beautiful or more frightened. Crouched as she was in the center of the huge bed, she reminded him of a cornered doe awaiting the death-stab of the hunter.

For a brief moment, Guyon considered telling her she had nothing to fear, that he would not touch her. But he could not say the words. On the one hand, he had no confidence that time alone would ease the problem and on the other, he was vividly aware that the rigid control he was exercising over his own rampant desire would snap before very much longer. The best he could hope for was to proceed slowly and do everything he could to win her trust.

On a nearby table, a thoughtful servant had left a pitcher of wine and two goblets. Guyon filled both

before approaching the bed. Brenna shook her head, trying to refuse the wine, but her husband insisted. "You ate and drank almost nothing at dinner," Guyon pointed out gently. "This will not harm you."

As he spoke, he sat down on the edge of the bed, near to her but not touching. For several minutes he sipped his wine silently, considering whether or not to tell Brenna right then about what he had learned from her sister and the Earl the previous day. At last he decided against that. She had enough to think about as it was without forcing her to relive horrifying memories.

Setting his goblet beside the bed, Guyon asked matter-of-factly, "Did the Lady Edythe give you any advice about tonight?"

Embarrassed by the suggestion that she might have discussed such intimate matters with her sister, Brenna looked away. She had been surreptitiously studying him as Guyon drank his wine. He was so compellingly masculine that it was difficult to tear her eyes from him. Over and over, her mind kept repeating the astonishing fact that this man was her husband. They belonged to each other. She had every right, in fact she was expected, to be alone with him like this.

Softly, Brenna murmured, "She told me to do as you say."

He glanced up, meeting her eyes. "And will you?"

Brenna swallowed hard. Her nod was so slight as to be almost imperceptible. "I don't want to be hurt any more than I can avoid."

Staring into her goblet, she didn't see Guyon wince. But she was well aware when he took the

wine from her, placing it beside his own, before recapturing her hands in his. "Brenna," Guyon murmured gently, "I have no intention of hurting you at all. Believe me."

Gray-green eyes widened in surprise. How could he possibly do what was supposed to happen that night without hurting her? "Y-you mean you're going to . . . leave me alone?" she stumbled.

Moving just a bit closer to her, Guyon held her gaze firmly as he asked, "Do you want me to?"

Brenna breathed in sharply. The idea that she might have a choice had not occurred to her. With the failure of her escape attempt, and Guyon's startling insistence that the marriage go on, she had given up all hope of remaining untouched. The suggestion that what she had regarded as inevitable might in fact not occur forced her to confront some very surprising sensations.

For long moments, during which Guyon silently agonized, Brenna said nothing. As he watched, delicate color suffused her pale cheeks. She bit her lip unconsciously, her eyes darting from his face to the lean, brown hands holding hers and back again. Finally her blush darkened further as, very softly, Brenna whispered, "Guyon, I know it isn't natural to be as afraid as I am . . . too scared to be a wife and mother . . . I feel shut off from so much. I-I don't want to stay like that. . . ." The instant the words were said, she dropped her head, overcome by her own brazenness.

Guyon's breath left him in a long sigh of pure relief. He gazed tenderly at his wife's bent head. If she had said she didn't want him under any circumstances, he would not have known what to do. She

was his, he had every right to her, but knowing what he did now he could not imagine forcing her to accept him. Her timidly whispered admission made it clear he would not have to.

Brenna looked up in surprise when Guyon suddenly left her. He crossed the room to pull the shutters closed. Soft gray twilight flowed through the cracks, suffusing the bridal chamber with gentle warmth. In the shadowy darkness, he loomed even larger and broader than before. Her throat clenched as, returning to the bed, Guyon began matter-of-factly to strip off his clothes.

Unable to look at him, Brenna wiggled further down in the bed and kept her eyes firmly shut. But she could not still her other senses. The sound each item of apparel made as it was dropped to the floor echoed in Brenna's mind. Her skin tingled to the sudden rush of warmth as the mattress beside her was depressed. Her breath filled with the clean, male scent of him.

When Guyon slid beneath the covers and reached out a gentle hand to draw her to him, Brenna started violently. Instantly, he soothed her. "I just want to hold you, Brenna. That's not so frightening, is it? You slept in my arms the night before last without objection."

Brenna now understood full well that Guyon was not embracing her simply to sleep, but she willed herself to go along with his gentle deception. Eased into his arms, her slender body was rigid against him until slowly Guyon's warmth, the smooth firmness of his skin, his tender stroking of her hair and back, the soft words he murmured all combined to ease Brenna's tension.

As her muscles relaxed and her body became more fluid, Guyon drew her even closer to him. He kept up the slow, easy motion of his hand down the length of her back, going just a little farther to caress the curve of her hip. Brenna sighed softly. Without being aware of it, she snuggled deeper into his powerfully muscled chest. A small, surprised smile touched her lips as she thought how pleasant this was. It was very nice to lie in a dark, quiet room and be fondled so gently. A small hand that had been tightly clenched uncurled. Without even noticing that she did so, Brenna touched the heavy mat of golden hair against which her cheek nestled. The tawny curls were undeniably inviting. Her fingers twined in them curiously as Brenna relished the startlingly new but highly enjoyable sensations darting through her.

Guyon stifled a groan, willing himself to remain still. The slender, lush body of his wife pressed so closely to him was wreaking havoc with his senses. He smiled wryly, aware that he would only have to move slightly to make Brenna acutely conscious of just what she was doing to him. But it was too soon for that. Somehow managing to sound as though he was requesting some perfectly commonplace service, he said, "Kiss me, Brenna."

Her eyes flew open. The small hand that had been so pleasantly occupied on his chest froze. "W-what?"

The topaz gaze caught and held her own as Guyon calmly reminded her, "You did say you'd do whatever I told you?" Reluctantly, Brenna nodded. "Then kiss me," he repeated.

Very slowly, Brenna raised herself up on one arm.

Guyon barely felt the brush of her lips against his cheek before her head darted back down.

"That won't do. Kiss me on the lips."

Brenna lifted her eyes reluctantly to look at him, as though trying to determine whether or not he was serious. When she saw that he was, she swallowed painfully. Timidly, she touched her mouth to his and instantly withdrew.

"Again," Guyon instructed, "and this time make it longer."

With her heart pounding and her breath locked in her throat, Brenna reluctantly obeyed. She let her lips linger against Guyon's a moment more before raising her head to stare curiously at him.

"You're getting better," he informed her blandly. "Kiss me once more, but this time part your lips and move them against mine."

Only the fact that he remained absolutely still beneath her allowed Brenna to do as he said. Had Guyon made any effort to take hold of her, she would have retreated fearfully. But only his lips moved under hers in a gentle, sweet kiss.

When Brenna drew back, she was breathing hard. Guyon observed the effect with secret pleasure. His instinctive guess that the best strategy would be to let her take the lead was proving correct. Unless he was very much mistaken, the first stirrings of desire could be seen in the gray-green pools gazing at him.

"Again," he murmured and this time Brenna obeyed without hesitation. Guyon allowed the kiss to go on for several moments before gently and carefully probing inward with his tongue. He heard Brenna gasp and was tempted to take hold of her, but stopped himself just in time. His restraint was

rewarded. As Guyon deepened the kiss, Brenna made no effort to escape. Instead, she gave herself up to the languid warmth his touch evoked.

When he at last moved away, she was startled by a keen stab of disappointment which faded quickly as Guyon said, "Now you kiss me like that, Brenna."

To his utter delight, she did. Her caress was tentative at first, and he could feel her trembling with the heady combination of passion and fear. For a moment, he was uncertain she could really go through with it. But passion won and a piercing stab of pleasure shot through him as Brenna's small tongue timidly touched his own.

Guyon's self-control snapped. Arms like iron bands closed around Brenna as, in a single swift movement, he laid her flat on her back across the bed with his length stretched over her. This time when he kissed her, Guyon held nothing back. His mouth closed tenderly on hers, parting her lips and fully tasting her hidden sweetness. Stripping the gown swiftly from her body, he murmured her name hungrily as his hands stroked her tiny waist and ripe hips, returning to cup the small, firm breasts that hardened at his touch.

For several moments, Guyon allowed his passion free rein. His mouth nibbled a line of fire down her throat while his skillful hands caressed and teased and provoked exactly the response he sought. Caught unawares, Brenna was swamped by liquid flames of passion. She moaned softly, arching against him.

Before the full realization of what he was doing to her could pierce the cloud of her delight, Guyon

drew back. The brief indulgence of his own driving need allowed him to somewhat restore his control. Thickly, he murmured, "Touch me, Brenna. I want to feel your hands on me."

A tiny whimper, not of fear but of desire, broke from her as slender hands stroked his heavily muscled shoulders and back. The warmth of his hair-roughened skin beneath her exploring fingers overwhelmed Brenna. Seized by a boldness she would not have imagined possible a few minutes before, she caressed the hard contours of his ribs, his lean waist and hips, even the sinewy thighs pressed so intimately against her.

"You learn fast," Guyon managed to mutter as he turned slightly, giving Brenna access to the broad, sun-bronzed expanse of his chest. She almost purred with pleasure as her hands touched the bulging muscles, fingers circling round the flat male nipples which, she was surprised to discover, were almost as sensitive as her own.

Spurred to discover what other parts of his body might be as susceptible to her touch, Brenna was momentarily stopped by the sudden awareness of something hard and alien brushing the softness between her legs. A tiny dart of fear, so benumbed by passion as to be almost unrecognizable, shot through her. Only to instantly dissolve under the renewed onslaught of Guyon's kisses.

Between mind-drugging caresses, he murmured, "I'm flesh and bone just like you, Brenna." A dry laugh escaped him. "Well, perhaps not *exactly* alike. But we were made to complement each other . . . to fit together perfectly . . . without pain or fear

. . . only pleasure, Brenna . . . for both of us . . . not just me . . . I'll make you come alive with pleasure . . . you'll see. . . ."

He was already doing that, Brenna thought dimly. Her whole body tingled to the delight of his caresses in ways she would never have imagined possible. Instincts long denied, but nonetheless in perfect working order, stirred within her. Moaning helplessly, Brenna's hips moved against Guyon in a rhythm as old as love itself.

"Brenna," he gasped thickly, "God, you're so beautiful . . . so warm and sweet and welcoming . . . Let me show you how it can be. . . ."

His mouth took her nipple, sucking gently as knowing fingers found the silken skin of her inner thigh and stroked upward. Brenna whimpered in near-painful need as he touched the moist core of her, stroking and caressing the satiny folds before carefully probing inward.

Brenna arched against his hand, unable to believe the lightning bolts of pleasure rippling through her. Her arms went around him tightly, drawing him even closer as slowly, tenderly, Guyon prepared her for him.

His patience was infinite. Certain now that no further thought of refusal remained in Brenna's mind, he held back through his own determination to make the experience perfect for her. Drawing on all his knowledge and skill, he unleashed a storm within her that only his complete possession could still.

When his lips left her hardened nipples to wander down the smooth skin of her abdomen, Brenna moaned in delight. But the moan turned to a gasp of

surprise when Guyon's hot, insistent mouth found her most sensitive point. Shock at the boldness of his caress vanished before the onslaught of ecstasy so intense as to be almost painful.

Brenna cried out once, then again. Her slender body, glowing with a sheen of perspiration, arched against the bed. Her small hands clenched spasmodically into the mattress. She was seized by an immense wave of pleasure that carried her higher and higher until the world exploded in a panorama of whirling lights and nerve-shattering sensation.

When consciousness returned, Brenna found herself lying limply across the bed. Guyon was gazing down at her tenderly. The warm glow in his topaz eyes made her flush as he brushed a gentle kiss against love-bruised lips. "Brenna," he breathed, "such an exquisite woman . . . so giving . . ."

Unbelievably the touch of his body against hers and the deep, warm caress of his voice roused Brenna at once. Knowing only that she had to be as close to him as possible, her body moved achingly against his, low whimpers of need breaking from her.

Guyon waited no longer. Lying her flat on the bed, he knelt above the writhing body of his wife, tenderly parting her legs. Again he found the warm, moist entrance to her and carefully eased her open before the hard, pulsating shaft of his manhood replaced his hand. Pressing just the smallest way in, he arched her hips upward, allowing her ultrasensitive pearl to rub against his shaft.

What his warm, tugging mouth had accomplished only minutes before happened again. A scream of pure ecstasy tore from Brenna as the wave carried

her even higher, shattering every cell of her being and sending her in a weightless, fearless spiral into the sky.

At the instant of his wife's greatest joy, Guyon plunged inward. He pierced the final barrier with a single thrust and began to move within her in deep, slow strokes that quickly brought his own pleasure to a crescendo. Together they scaled the exquisite heights of rapture before at last exploding together in an intensity of delight that rivaled the very heavens. So intense was Brenna's pleasure that she fainted beneath her husband's powerful, surging body.

When his heartbeat had slowed somewhat and his breathing more or less returned to normal, Guyon moved carefully in the bed. He drew his unconscious wife to him tenderly, pulling the covers over them both before the combined effects of profound relief and ecstasy greater than any he had yet known overtook him and he, too, slipped into dreamless sleep.

Brenna woke to the unaccustomed sensation of something warm and hard close against her. She stirred gingerly, unwilling to disturb the delightful sense of well-being radiating through her. Her smooth leg touched Guyon's hair-roughened thigh and she gasped softly. In the bright morning light filtering through the shutters, she could make out his features clearly. Asleep, he looked younger and even somehow vulnerable. The hard lines of his face were relaxed and the immense strength of his body temporarily dormant. Thick, sun-tipped lashes, touchingly long for a man, fell across his tanned cheeks. Brenna touched a finger to them wonder-

ingly. She caught herself thinking how beautiful such lashes would look on a little girl, and blushed.

The events of the previous night might have seemed nothing more than a wonderful dream, except for the utter peace of her mind and body. She felt at once taken out of herself and made complete. It was as though some vital part of the puzzle had slipped into place. She knew herself in a way she would never have thought possible, and she knew Guyon to a degree that made her flush.

Hardly daring to breathe, Brenna stroked the expanse of sun-bronzed shoulders and chest showing above the sheet. His skin was just as she remembered; warm and smooth with parts pleasantly roughened by golden hairs. Emboldened by his stillness, her hand stroked lower, touching his thigh through the bedcovers. A movement beneath the sheet distracted her. In the next instant, Brenna gasped as Guyon's manhood thrust hard and urgent against her exploring hand.

"If you insist on so arousing me first thing in the morning, my lady," he growled good-naturedly, "you must be prepared for the consequences."

The experiences of the night before had instilled Brenna with new-found confidence, and curiosity. Boldly, she said, "It seems to have a life of its own, doesn't it?"

Guyon choked with laughter. Sputtering, he nodded. "It does indeed, my sweet, and you inspire it to be livelier than ever!"

Giggling, Brenna observed the still-growing bulge beneath the sheet. "Isn't it uncomfortable?" she shortly asked.

Guyon's fervent agreement left no doubt that he

was suffering acutely. Their laughter mingled as joyfully as their bodies as he swiftly tossed back the covers and pulled his wife into his eager arms.

This time their lovemaking was less gentle, but nonetheless satisfying. In the moments before all conscious thought became impossible, Brenna learned somewhat more about how her husband's body and her own functioned. She gloried in their union, dimly recalling Guyon's assurances that they were made to fit together perfectly.

How right he was! Brenna thought dreamily sometime later when passion had stilled to warm contentment. She cuddled happily in his arms, her head against his chest and her legs entwined with his. But for the ever-increasing sounds from the bailey beneath their windows and the knowledge that they would shortly have visitors, they could easily have drifted back into sleep. Brenna was almost there when a knock at the door brought her upright.

Guyon slid easily from the bed, utterly unselfconscious about his nakedness. As Brenna burrowed furiously under the covers, he flung open the door to accept a tray of food and drink from a grinning servant. Her face was bright red when he returned, depositing the tray on a nearby table while smiling at her broadly.

"Planning to remain abed all day, my lady?" Guyon teased.

Brenna shook her head, but refused either to look at him or move until Guyon fetched a robe for each of them. Only when they were both more or less decent did she deign to join him at breakfast.

Never had food tasted so good to Brenna. Greedily spreading a thick slice of bread with honey, she

ignored Guyon's derisive snort and munched contentedly. He didn't stint, she noticed, as the provisions were rapidly depleted. With the worst of their hunger eased, they fed each other choice bits washed down with sweet milk. By the time breakfast was finished, Brenna was ensconced on her husband's lap, giggling happily and wishing they could stay just the two of them in the quiet room all day.

But it wasn't to be. Shortly their privacy would be invaded by the last ritual of marriage. Resignedly, they rose to dress. Before the servants were admitted, and then the delegation of lords and ladies came to confirm that there was in fact a marriage, Guyon surprised Brenna by returning to the bed. Swiftly he stripped back the covers, exposing the mattress to his gaze.

Puzzled, she came to stand behind him, her eyes slowly widening as Brenna realized that the sheet she had lain upon was unstained. Where was the proof of virginity that should surely be there? The proof the lords and ladies would expect to see? Frantically, she looked at her husband, a denial of guilt springing to her lips.

Guyon stilled her with a gentle kiss. "Hush, Brenna, there's nothing to be afraid of. The clean sheet is proof of my own skill, not any lack on your part."

When she still didn't understand, he had the grace to blush before explaining, "If a man has some experience with women . . ." He broke off. That was wrong. The sudden flare in Brenna's eyes warned him his wife didn't want to hear about his previous experiences. "That is to say," he started over, "if a man is considerate, there's no reason a

woman should suffer the first time she makes love. I know full well you were virgin. It only remains to convince the lords and ladies of that."

"But how . . ." she began.

The sudden appearance of a knife in her husband's hand stopped her. As Brenna watched in disbelief, Guyon calmly slit the inside of his forearm, allowing the blood to drip onto the previously clean sheet. When he was satisfied with the amount, he wrapped a cloth around the wound. Kissing her lightly, he said, "Wave the blanket over it so it dries quickly. Then that should satisfy the most probing eyes."

White-faced, she hastened to do as he said. Guyon watched her, smiling. There were less dramatic ways to fool the delegation, a pig's bladder filled with blood being a popular alternative, but he had seized the opportunity to convince Brenna of his devotion to her. Though he was more than satisfied by her response of the previous night and that morning, he knew there was still some distance to go before she would be fully at ease with him. To help bring that about, he intended to leave no doubt in her mind that she could trust and rely on him utterly. On Guyon's part, he knew beyond question that he would protect his lovely young wife with his very life. That knowledge made him feel oddly humble. He had never expected to find such love. Having found it, he would nurture and cherish it against all dangers.

The thought of danger reminded him that there were matters about which he and Brenna still had to speak. Sometime soon he must gently help her remember the origins of her fears. Now that they

seemed in large part banished, he felt safe in doing so. When she knew what he had learned from her sister and the Earl, the past could truly be put to rest and they could get on with their life together.

Smiling to himself, Guyon went to admit the servants and begin the first of what he fully expected would be many happy days.

Chapter Eight

"THERE'S NO REASON TO BE CONCERNED, MY DEAR," the Lady Matilda insisted. "You look lovely."

Brenna managed to smile, but inwardly she was not convinced. She considered the Norman fashions far too revealing. Whereas the pleated tunics and loose-fitting mantles she customarily wore merely hinted at the beauty of her form, these new clothes fit so snugly as to hide almost nothing.

A light blue tunic clung so closely to her body that through it the hardness of her nipples and even the indentation of her navel could be seen. The crimson surcoat worn over it made the garment decent, but just barely. Tightly laced at the sides, the surcoat fully revealed the ripe curve of her breasts and the smallness of her waist which was further accentuated by a tightly wrapped jeweled belt. The early fall weather was still too warm to require a mantle, but

Brenna had seen how they were worn and thought they added little to a woman's modesty. Made of a single length of linen or wool, instead of the double length she was used to, the mantle covered only the back. Attached by brooches to the shoulders, it was more ornamental than utilitarian.

Considering the display made of her body, it seemed ridiculous to veil her hair. But even here, the Normans turned propriety into provocation. The veil held in place by a thin gold circlet was transparent. Through it, the luxurious richness of her waist-length tresses could be clearly seen.

Brenna bit her lip as she considered the courage it would take to so flaunt herself. Only the knowledge that Guyon expected her to dress as a Norman lady made her able to face the inevitable. After two months of marriage, with each day more dazzlingly happy than the last, she wished only to make him proud of her. Perhaps in time, she thought hopefully, she would learn to accept the strange customs of a people who were fiercely possessive of their women even as they didn't hesitate to display their charms.

At least she could not fault the Lady Matilda's kindness to her. The personal interest of the Duchess assured that Brenna received at least token acceptance. In a court overly supplied with disappointed ladies angered by Guyon's marriage, that was no mean feat. No one other than William's consort could have pulled it off.

Smiling sincerely this time, Brenna turned to the tiny, bright-eyed woman next to her. In her mid-thirties, and after bearing nine children in thirteen years, Matilda had no claim to beauty. She was so small as to appear almost childlike herself. Brenna,

who was of only slightly more than average height, towered over her. The Duchess's features were plain, and her hair, worn in plaits, already showed gray among the lackluster brown strands. Her figure, gloriously garbed though it was, could be best described as dumpy. Though her clothing was by no means as snug-fitting as Brenna's, fashion allowed little concealment of the ravages worked by childbirth and nursing.

Yet Matilda carried herself proudly and was clearly the dominant female figure in a court filled with beautiful women. In one respect she was very much like Edythe. Her confidence was unshakable, stemming as it did from the absolute certainty of her lord's favor. Duke William loved his tiny, unpretentious wife. If his eye ever did fall on one of the ladies of his court, he never followed that interest to the bedchamber. Perhaps because of his own bastard birth, he was acutely conscious of where licentiousness could lead, and he avoided it like a plague.

"I cannot thank you enough for all you have done," Brenna said warmly as she regarded the Duchess. "You have made me feel so welcome."

Matilda brushed aside her thanks good-naturedly. "You *are* welcome, child. Have no doubt of that. The Duke and I are both delighted that Guyon has finally wed. We both have the highest regard for him, and his happiness is very important to us."

Perhaps because of the unexpected similarity to Edythe, Brenna felt at ease with the Duchess. So much so that, after glancing around to be sure the serving women were well-occupied, she murmured, "I think, my lady, that there are some here in Falaise

who do not share your pleasure at Guyon's marriage."

Matilda laughed, a surprisingly robust sound to come from so small a woman. Her eyes glowed even more brightly as she nodded. "You seem to be a sensible girl, Brenna, so I'll speak frankly. It would be impossible to count the number of ladies grinding their pretty teeth and stamping their tiny feet over Guyon's defection. To their way of thinking, it's bad enough for him to have been snapped up so suddenly. But the fact that you are English adds insult to injury. You will hear some nasty mutterings, my dear. Do your best to ignore them."

Matilda was frank indeed, Brenna thought ruefully. Yet she did no more than speak the truth. Barely a day after arriving with Guyon at the Duke's keep in Falaise, Brenna was already well-aware of the outrage and envy surrounding her marriage. For that reason alone, she was determined to prove herself as beautiful, as gracious, and as accomplished as any Norman lady. Even if it meant displaying herself in their immodest clothes.

"Are your quarters comfortable?" Matilda asked, as she smoothed a last wrinkle from Brenna's veil.

"Far more than comfortable, my lady. Guyon told me of the magnificence of your home, but I could not quite believe it. Now I find even my expectations are greatly surpassed."

Matilda smiled at this pretty speech. She liked this English girl. No matter what anyone said—and they said plenty!—she would be good for Guyon. Already he seemed at once more relaxed and more vigorous than ever before. Matilda knew his charac-

ter well enough to be sure an English marriage would not sway his loyalty to the Duke. That being the case, she saw only good in an event which made the young Lord D'Arcy even more capable and useful.

Giving no hint of her thoughts, the Duchess said, "I have heard that King Edward's palace at Thorney is extraordinary. Is that not so?"

"It is beautiful," Brenna agreed. "But neither so large nor so well-designed as Falaise." This was not flattery. The ducal manor was the grandest residence Brenna had ever seen. Rising above a smallish town of largely daub and wattle huts, the immense stone castle dominated the entire countryside.

Brenna's eyes had widened in astonishment as soon as she and Guyon, escorted by his knights and followed by their train of servants, approached the gatehouse. Set in the center of high stone walls completely enclosing the castle grounds, the gatehouse guarded a drawbridge running over a protective moat. In light of the Duke's vast power and the strength of the garrison maintained within, the drawbridge was customarily left down. Yet Brenna could not help but notice that as they neared alert, hard-faced guards scrutinized them with care. Only when Guyon was recognized did their regard ease into respectful welcome.

Just past the gatehouse stretched an immense bailey, the open field providing space for the constant military training, as well as room for stables, granaries, barracks, and workshops.

To her surprise, she saw that the far end of the bailey ended with yet another wall and gatehouse, this guarding the high mount on which the keep itself

sat. Here the party dismounted, the horses led off to be stabled, the knights dispersing at Guyon's order to seek their own pleasure, and the servants scrambling to unpack the baggage carts. With her hand in Guyon's, and his reassuring smile warming her, Brenna climbed the three-tiered staircase leading to the keep.

Any lingering doubts she might have had about the Norman preoccupation with holding what was theirs faded as she saw that the stairs ended in a second drawbridge from which the keep's slit windows offered easy target.

She breathed a silent prayer of thanks that they came as honored guests rather than enemies. To assault such a mammoth structure would be folly indeed. Only when they were at last inside the keep did the harshness of an armed fortress give way grudgingly to the graciousness of a palatial home.

"The tapestries are beautiful," Brenna said as she and Matilda left the Duchess's quarters. "Were they made here?"

The older woman nodded, pausing to gaze fondly at one of the lushly woven wall-coverings depicting lords and ladies at the hunt. "When I first came to Falaise," she explained, "it was very much a fortress and not at all a home. I was determined to do something about that." She smiled slightly. "Fortunately, my lord was willing to indulge me."

Brenna bit back the impulse to suggest that Duke William's *indulgence* had a practical purpose. She had seen enough with King Edward and the Earl Harold to know that any man who ruled required a proper setting to impress his followers. The great hall at Falaise was certainly such a setting.

Surrounded at all four corners by angle towers reached by circular stone staircases, the great hall was roofed in timber and surrounded by walls some ten feet thick. Within these walls were set small, private rooms such as those used by the Duchess and honored guests. At either end of the Hall, recessed windows allowed a small amount of sunlight. Between the windows were fireplaces complete with the chimneys Guyon had described.

He was right about them, Brenna thought as she and the Duchess entered the Hall. They drew off a great deal of smoke and made the surroundings far more pleasant. Looking around, she noticed other amenities new to her. Along each side of the Hall ran a window gallery which gave a sense of light and airiness to what would otherwise have been a stolid, almost smothering shelter. At intervals throughout the Hall, semicircular arches cut across the space. The arches fascinated Brenna. She could not quite understand what held the wedge-cut stones in place. Each time she walked under one, she glanced up as though expecting it to collapse.

Noticing her concern, Matilda laughed. "They're quite safe, you know. The architects insist they'll last forever. In fact, I've even heard that these arches may eventually make it possible to roof buildings in stone."

That would certainly be a vast improvement, Brenna thought. Timbered roofs meant the constant danger of fire. Great keeps that were built entirely of timber, such as Earl Harold's at Winchester, customarily suffered major fires every few years. Edythe had lost count of the number of times portions of her home had to be rebuilt. That was

why separate bowers set some distance from the main hall housed the family, chief retainers, and honored guests, as well as most household goods.

Much as Brenna hated to admit it, the Norman method of building in stone did seem safer. If they managed someday to eliminate timber altogether, their buildings might well endure forever.

The surprising comfort and graciousness of Falaise made Brenna yearn all the more to reach Guyon's own holding closer to the coast. Only then would she feel fully his wife as she took up her household duties. Well-trained in all aspects of home management, Brenna had no doubt she could add greatly to Guyon's comfort. But such pleasure had to wait. After his long stay in England, extended by reason of his marriage, his presence would be required for some time at William's court. It could be months yet before they were free to at last reach their own land.

There she fully expected to spend the rest of her life secure in Guyon's love, nurturing their children. Children. A warm glow lit Brenna's gray-green eyes as she considered what it would be like to bear Guyon's child. After only two months of marriage, she already viewed her regular flux with disappointment. She longed to hold a baby made of their love. Considering Guyon's intense virility and her own eager response, such fulfillment could certainly not be too far off.

Brenna smiled softly as she reflected on the vast change her husband had created in her. Under his careful tutelage, she blossomed into a woman unafraid of either passion or its natural outcome. It had been no small thing to overcome her fear. Exquisite lovemaking alone had not been enough. Gently,

carefully, Guyon had helped her uncover the origins of her fears, and by confronting them, banish them forever.

Sadness flitted across Brenna's lovely features as she thought of her mother's fate. For so long the memory of rape and murder at the hands of marauding Norsemen had haunted Brenna's nightmares. Barely four years old when it happened, she had witnessed the entire atrocity from the stable loft that was her favorite private place. Helpless to aid her mother or any of the other women, she had carried the added burden of guilt from the knowledge that had she remained safely at home as she was bid, her mother would not have gone in search of her and the outcome of that day could have been far different.

With the King's peace now firmly established throughout England, it was difficult for those as young as Brenna to remember a time when raiders dared to attack even towns as strong as Norfolk. Yet such attacks had once been commonplace, and might someday be again if the King's failing health did not improve.

Brenna shivered slightly, considering the possible consequences of Edward's stubborn refusal to clarify the succession. Intensely loyal to the Earl Harold, particularly now that she had her marriage to thank him for, she could not understand why Edward hesitated. Harold would make an excellent ruler. He was strong, intelligent, just, and capable of commanding the loyalty of the earls. What more could anyone ask?

Unaware that she was frowning slightly, Brenna was startled when a young, melodious voice nearby exclaimed, "For Heaven's sake, don't scowl! You

look absolutely glorious. All the cats at court will be scratching their eyes out before this day is over."

Laughing, Brenna turned to greet her sister-in-law. When she considered how worried she had been about meeting Lady Roanna D'Arcy her laughter deepened. Instructed to join them at Falaise, Roanna had customarily disregarded her brother's will and met them at the port of Honfleur. Barely had Brenna disembarked from the longboat that carried them across the Channel than she was confronted by a remarkably beautiful, vivacious, strong-willed young lady who made it clear that her brother had better be happy or she would know the reason why.

The spectacle of Guyon torn between irritation and pleasure at his sister's unexpected appearance was too good to miss. Pleasure won as he swept her into a warm embrace before proudly presenting his wife. Roanna, Brenna realized at once, was every bit as intelligent and perceptive as her brother. Under the cool scrutiny of large, amber eyes, she flushed slightly before returning the look in full measure.

Whatever she saw must have satisfied Roanna. After barely a moment, she smiled broadly, her beauty made all the greater by her delight in her brother's good fortune. From that instant on, the two young women were friends.

"She thinks our clothes are indecent," the Lady Matilda teased as she, too, greeted Roanna.

"Oh, no!" Brenna insisted, horrified that she might be thought impolite. The amusement of the other women did nothing to ease her discomfort.

"You're bound to be shocked," Roanna allowed

matter-of-factly, "after those loose things you're used to. But you'll adjust. Before very long, you'll wonder how you ever managed without Norman fashion." Eyes twinkling, she twirled gracefully, showing off the full skirt of her dark wine surcoat worn over a tawny silk tunic. Few women could wear those colors successfully. It took the startling combination of Roanna's luxurious golden hair and perfect figure to carry it off.

"What's wrong with a woman looking like a woman?" her sister-in-law challenged winningly. "At least that way we get the men to think of something other than fighting, if only for a little while."

Roanna was being too modest, as Brenna well knew. Few gentlemen found themselves able to think of anything at all in her presence. Guyon had confided that he had already turned aside some dozen marriage proposals before Roanna's eighteenth birthday. When Brenna asked why, he grinned sheepishly and explained, "My darling sister is every bit as stubborn and determined as I am myself. I couldn't wish her on any man I wasn't absolutely sure could handle her."

Beneath the jocular disclaimer lay the very real devotion Guyon and Roanna shared. Drawn to each other by their similar natures, they were also bound by bastardy and all the problems that went with it. Had Roanna been born the legitimate daughter of even a minor noble, she could easily have been betrothed in infancy. But her origins cast a pall over her future, not dispelled until her brother rose to great power and wealth in the Duke's trust. Now many vied for Roanna's hand, but she would have

none of them. Brenna sensed she wanted a mate as strong as herself, someone she could share her heart and soul with as well as her life. Having lately come to that most fortunate state herself, Brenna sympathized entirely. She would do everything she could to see Roanna happily wed.

Gray-green eyes glowed teasingly as she told the other girl, "Thank Heaven you're here. Now no one will notice me and I can slip in unobserved."

"No chance of that!" Roanna snorted. "You were spotted the moment you set foot in the hall. Why I can see half a dozen ladies right now who are calling down the ills of seven devils on your unsuspecting head."

"Charming thought," Brenna muttered as, accompanied by the vastly amused Duchess, they made their way to the center of the Hall.

"My brother was the greatest prize at court," Roanna went on cheerfully. "Rich, landed, not too hard to look at, and reputedly quite expert in bed. What lady could resist?" She laughed at Brenna's blush. Roanna's frankness took some getting used to. But then everyone at the Norman court seemed disposed to speak of intimate matters in the most candid terms.

There was nothing restrained about these people, Brenna reflected as she scanned the great hall crowded with splendidly garbed lords and ladies. Whether fighting, eating, drinking, or pursuing the amatory arts, they lived life to the fullest. She could appreciate their enthusiasm, which she fully shared, even while wishing they would be a little more circumspect in their speech.

In a less than subtle bid to change the subject,

Brenna asked, "Do all these people live here? If so, I can't imagine how you feed them, let alone keep them entertained and out of mischief."

Roanna and the Duchess glanced at each other good-humoredly before allowing Brenna's modesty to sway them. "This is a somewhat larger than usual crowd," Matilda explained. "My lord has called his barons to assembly, and of course they bring their knights, retainers, and so on. Sometimes I do wonder how we feed them. Everyone remembers to bring his sword, but no one ever thinks to bring any food!"

The younger women smiled, knowing full well that the Duchess would never allow anyone to impinge on her hospitality. However many people her noble husband chose to invite under his roof, she would somehow contrive to feed and shelter them all in a manner that left nothing to be desired.

Good manners prevented Brenna from wondering out loud what might be the purpose for such an assembly. Certainly it seemed very much like the meetings of the Witan, the ancient Anglo-Saxon council of nobles who met during times of crisis to advise the king. But she knew of no crisis that might have brought the Norman lords to Falaise. If there was any such in the wind, Guyon and everyone else were being very closemouthed about it.

Studying the men scattered in small groups about the Hall, Brenna tried to remember what she knew of their relation to Duke William. Like Guyon, they had all sworn oaths of fealty to him and held their land and power at his pleasure. In this respect, they were much like the warrior *thegns* who served Har-

old and the other English earls. Yet there was one great distinction; those lords who controlled land stood far above those who did not. Whereas in England it was the oath that mattered, and all else flowed directly from one's lord, here those with land could expect to live a good deal better than those without. Consequently, many younger sons of Norman families were perpetually land-hungry. Not surprisingly, this contributed to their warlike temperment. They were ever ready to go off on any bloody venture that might result in a land grant.

Privately Brenna was dismayed by the foolishness of any system that so encouraged perpetual fighting. It was bad enough in England where the earls were constantly struggling for supremacy. How much worse it would be if one was to add to the political cauldron the ambitions of every man with any claim to nobility.

Nor did she think much of how the Normans treated those of lower birth. Granted they had no equivalent of the Anglo-Saxon *theow*. But surely their serfs were worse off than any slave in England. On the journey from Honfleur, to Falaise, Brenna had seen many of those poor souls toiling in the fields of their lords. She had never seen more miserable, ill-treated people anywhere. If conditions were at all similar on Guyon's manor, they would be changed forthwith. Brenna was certain that Guyon cared for her far too much to resist her efforts at improving the lives of those who served him.

He made no secret of his regard as he turned to watch her cross the hall in company with the Duchess and Lady Roanna. Topaz eyes wandered unre-

strainedly over her slender loveliness in a look Brenna recognized all too well. It evoked powerful memories of the previous night when, disregarding any lingering weariness from their journey, they had made tenderly passionate love until the first gray light of dawn lit the horizon.

Now fully awakened to the power of her own sensuality, Brenna did not hesitate to boldly arouse her husband. Not that it required much doing. It seemed they had only to look at each other to seek their bed. The effort to stand so close to each other without touching was almost beyond them. Several minutes passed before either noticed the amused glances of the Duke and his companions.

"My dear Guyon," the Duke chided kiddingly. "Here we are in the middle of a discussion of state affairs and you break off to stare like a love-stricken boy at your very own wife. Should I conclude you find the Lady Brenna more interesting than my own poor concerns?"

"Of course, my lord," Guyon assured him, entering into the Duke's teasing mood. "She is a great distraction. I fear I will be of no further use to you at all, at least not when my lady is about."

Brenna flushed painfully. She tried to draw away, but Guyon held her arm gently but determinedly. "You are so beautiful, my love," he murmured. "I cannot be blamed for staring."

"Indeed, he cannot," the Duke agreed. Graciously, he added, "You are a delightful addition to my court, Lady Brenna. I hope you will be happy here."

Startled by his apparent sincerity, Brenna stared up at the Duke. He was a tall man, almost as tall as

Guyon, and ruggedly built with a barrel chest, powerful arms, and long, sinewy legs. Despite his high rank, he was dressed much like the other men in a knee-length tunic of undyed linen, a dark blue surcoat belted at the waist, and finely spun chausses worn with leather boots.

His dark, receding hair was shaved high at the back of his head in the fashion of the Norman nobility. His face was likewise shaved, except for the long black mustache he cultivated above a surprisingly sensual mouth. His eyes set beneath heavy brows were piercingly black. Brenna did not doubt that they missed very little.

Born from the illicit union of a willful duke and the beautiful daughter of a Falaise tanner, William might easily have been relegated to his mother's humble status. But for his father's continued inability to produce a male heir within marriage, he could have lived out his days in one of the daub-and-wattle huts surrounding the massive stone keep. As it was, his life was in constant danger from infancy on. More times than anyone could remember, the tanner and his sons had rushed to the boy's defense, keeping him safe until he could grow strong enough to protect himself.

At thirty-eight, the Duke had survived against all odds to triumph over illegitimacy, the early death of his father, and the constant threat from dozens of rivals for the dukedom. Through keen intelligence, superb fighting and leadership skills, and a willingness to act with absolute callousness when he thought it expedient, William secured his patrimony. For the last several years, he had ruled in Normandy without opposition.

Sensing the immense energy and ambition of the man, Brenna caught herself wondering if he might not be just the slightest bit bored.

"I am sure I will be very happy here, my lord," she said softly. "Everyone has been so kind." Turning to Matilda, she added, "Especially your Duchess, who has done her best to transform me into a Norman lady."

William glanced appreciatively at his wife's handiwork. Brenna could not help but notice that as his gaze shifted from her to Matilda, the Duke's rather fierce expression softened. When he spoke to the Duchess, his harsh voice was suddenly gentle and warm.

"You have outdone yourself," William assured his lady. "No one surpasses your taste in fashion."

"The Lady Brenna would look exquisite in sackcloth and ashes," Matilda said tartly. Relenting slightly, she added, "However, our styles do become her."

Embarrassed once more to be the subject of such scrutiny, Brenna instinctively moved closer to Guyon. He responded by putting an arm around her narrow waist, drawing her against the hard length of his chest and thigh. There she nestled contentedly as the conversation turned to hunting and the merits of various types of falcons.

Some of Brenna's nervousness about how well she could fit into her new life began to fade as she listened and, after a brief time, began to take part in the friendly talk. Despite all the superficial differences of language, dress, and setting, there were similarities to what she had known before. Certainly, the devotion of the Duke and his lady was no less than

that shared by the Earl Harold and Edythe. The tiny woman looked up at her husband with a warm, loving expression that for all its gentleness still suggested great strength and fortitude. In love she clearly was, but Brenna doubted the Duchess stood for any nonsense even from her great lord.

Considering the difficulties they had to surmount in order to achieve their marriage, it was no wonder Matilda and the Duke were so close. When the union of the Norman lord and the Count of Flanders's daughter was first suggested, both parties expected it to go through without difficulty. Certainly, William was anxious to marry. He had a normal young man's eagerness for a woman, but his determination to produce no bastards of his own put a harsh damper on his ardor. As for Matilda, she had never met the Duke. But she knew of his tremendous strength and courage in the face of adversity, and admired him greatly.

When they did meet, a short time before their marriage was to be celebrated, their attraction to each other quickly developed a more personal basis. In William, Matilda saw a man she could both desire and respect. When he spoke of his hopes for the future, she sensed the great visions stirring within him. Life with the Duke would certainly not be easy; he would be away a great deal, there would be much fighting, and there was no guarantee that a rival would not one day topple him from power. But such concerns did not sway Matilda. Within only a few hours of meeting William, she knew she wanted to spend her life with him.

For his part, the Duke looked beyond the tiny form and plain features to the woman within. He

saw strength, courage, and—perhaps most importantly—absolute loyalty. Matilda was exactly the consort he needed. With her he could cast off, if only for a time, the cares of his position and find in the peace she offered both comfort and renewal.

When their marriage was suddenly and unexpectedly forbidden by the Pope, William raged in disbelief. While Rome claimed the prohibition was for reasons of consanguinity, the Duke knew full well the true motivations were political. Union with the Count of Flanders would make him even more powerful and untouchable. Rival lords who did not want to see that happen had aligned themselves with the Pope, with the result that for three long years William chafed in frustration and Matilda sorrowed for her lord.

Driven finally to disregard the Pope's ruling, William risked the severest censure by claiming his bride without holy approval. Ever practical, he wasted no time wedding, bedding, and impregnating the willing Matilda. For eight years afterward, he also had to protect her from the censure of those who claimed she was more mistress than wife. When at last papal approval of the marriage was grudgingly given, both William and Matilda knew profound relief. But they also never forgot the opposition that had made their love all the stronger and enduring.

Forged against such a harsh anvil, Matilda's warm, outgoing nature was all the more admirable. She radiated serenity and joy which could not help but touch almost everyone who knew her.

Beside the Duchess, Roanna smiled happily. Some sally from a young lord had amused her. He

had worked his way into the group apparently for the sole purpose of talking with Guyon's beautiful sister. Brenna watched indulgently as the two engaged in a mild flirtation under the cautious but tolerant eyes of both Guyon and the Duke. Already she thought of Roanna as a friend and knew that as long as her sister-in-law was nearby, she would not lack for feminine companionship.

Brenna had just begun to truly relax and enjoy herself when the sudden sensation of being watched pierced her awareness. Glancing round, she caught sight of a tall, beautiful woman staring at her angrily. Though the Great Hall was filled with richly garbed ladies, many of whom had a real claim to beauty, this woman stood out. Hair like spun moonbeams tumbled in thick waves to her waist. Alabaster skin glowed against large sapphire eyes and a generous, well-shaped mouth whose vermilion tint seemed to owe nothing to artifice.

Her body beneath a tightly fitting mauve tunic and lavender silk surcoat appeared perfect. Large, high breasts beckoned a man's hand. A tiny waist flowed into gently rounded hips. As the woman moved, the outline of slender thighs and long legs could be clearly seen.

Without shifting her gaze from Brenna, the woman moved through the hall with feline grace, until she stood in front of Guyon. Dark color suffused his face as he caught sight of her.

Brenna felt her husband's arm tighten around her waist as he muttered: "Elene . . ."

The lady smiled. Extending a slender, white hand, she stepped forward gaily. "Guyon . . . it's been so

long. I had no idea you were back." Her voice was low and husky, the tone so intimate as to suggest that she and Guyon were alone.

Beneath Guyon's suddenly taut hold, Brenna stiffened. She eyed the lovely interloper narrowly. Whoever the woman might be, there was no mistaking her proprietary attitude. Newly awakened to the subtle nuances of male-female relationships, Brenna knew instantly that the lady was no stranger to Guyon's bed.

Even as she breathed deeply and told herself to remain calm, rage closed like a red mask over her vision. The calmer side of her nature asserted that Guyon must certainly have acquired his skill somewhere, and that meetings with his former paramours were perhaps inevitable. But the reality of such a confrontation banished sensible thought. She knew only that the beautiful Elene still wanted Guyon, and to Brenna that was tantamount to a declaration of war.

Drawing on instincts finely honed through generations of beautiful, wise women, Brenna moved ever so slightly to insinuate herself between her husband and the lady. Smiling through clenched teeth, she murmured softly, "Won't you introduce us, darling? You know how anxious I am to meet your . . . friends. . . ."

Guyon tore his gaze from Elene to stare at his wife in surprise. He was far too well acquainted with the gentler sex to mistake the steel beneath her words. Brenna was a constant source of amazement. Only weeks before she had been ready to cloister herself in a convent rather than allow him to touch her. Now she bristled with the full glorious fury of a woman

ready and willing to defend what she regarded as exclusively her own.

Torn between admiring astonishment and a treacherous urge to laugh, he complied hastily. "Lady Elene, I have the honor to present my wife, the Lady Brenna. We arrived yesterday from England. No doubt the news had not yet reached you."

Elene shot Brenna a scathing look before stepping closer to the reluctant object of her attention. "I had heard of your marriage, Guyon," she purred, "but I couldn't quite credit the story. After all, England is such a wild, uncivilized place. It didn't seem possible you would have found someone there worthy of marriage."

"Obviously, he did," Matilda snapped. She made no secret of her dislike for the very forward Lady Elene.

Observing his wife's frown, William's amused look vanished. Taking Guyon's arm, he said swiftly, "Those matters of state I mentioned are becoming more pressing by the moment, my boy. What say we find a quiet corner to hash them out?"

Guyon nodded gratefully. Bidding a polite if relieved farewell to the ladies, he followed his liegelord. When they were some little distance away, William could be heard to laugh heartily. But Guyon did not join in. Instead, he cast a worried look over his shoulder to where Brenna stood, eyes flashing and back stiffened.

"You are much at court since your husband's death, Lady Elene," the Duchess said icily. "Yet we see you rarely in the chapel or the women's solar. I suppose you prefer other . . . activities. . . ."

Elene had the grace to blush. For all her presump-

tion, she did not dare offend Matilda. "Not at all, my lady," she said hastily. "If I have seemed negligent in my duties, I ask your pardon. It is only that, after so long in mourning, I yearn to walk in the garden, ride to hounds, visit the market. All harmless pursuits."

The Duchess regarded her doubtfully. She was willing enough to turn a blind eye to the escapades of unmarried lords and ladies. But when any dalliance threatened the happiness and stability of a wedded couple, she was instantly alarmed. Marriage, and the children who came from it, were the bedrock of society. Without such a strong foundation, ambitious rivals inevitably clashed violently. Fate alone had decreed that from such a rent in the social fabric, a man of extraordinary attributes such as William would rise to power. On the whole, it was better to avoid such conflicts by preserving the sanctity of marriage against all threats.

Lady Elene, she did not doubt, was just such a threat. Her possessive attitude toward Guyon was unmistakable. She clearly regarded his marriage as no more than a temporary inconvenience. Brenna would have a difficult enough time adjusting to her new life without the added complication of a persistent mistress.

Resolved to protect the young English girl, Matilda sent the Lady Elene on her way with a final admonishment about the need to devote herself to activities befitting a widow. Shortly thereafter, the Duchess departed to assure that all would be ready for the evening's feast.

Left alone, Roanna and Brenna eyed each other

hesitantly. Roanna despised Elene, and would just have soon said so. But she did not wish to upset her sister-in-law, who must rightly be annoyed by the woman's unwarranted attentions to her husband. Drawing Brenna into one of the small arched windows at the end of the Hall, Roanna tried to distract her with talk of the coming evening. But Brenna would have none of it. She listened distractedly for several minutes before murmuring, "They were lovers, weren't they?"

Roanna hesitated. There seemed no point in trying to lie, yet discretion and loyalty to her brother demanded that she say as little as possible. "It's all over with," she said at last. "You have no reason to be concerned."

Brenna was not convinced. Patting the cushion on the window seat beside her, she said, "Tell me."

Sighing, Roanna sat down. She thought for a moment before beginning. "Elene and my brother have known each other for many years. When they first met, I believe Guyon wanted to marry her. But Elene's family is very wealthy and powerful. She expected to marry a man of similar station, and she didn't believe Guyon could ever rise far enough above the stigma of bastardy to satisfy her. So instead of marrying, he became her lover. After a time, Guyon went away to the Saracen lands and Elene wed a rich old lord who demanded little of her. While she was married, Guyon would not touch her. But after the old lord died, their relationship resumed. By then, Guyon had amassed great wealth and won the Duke's favor. Elene was eager for marriage, but Guyon hesitated. I think he had

become disenchanted with her and knew he wanted something more in a wife. Still, Elene didn't expect him to wed someone else, and certainly not so suddenly."

Roanna smiled as she remembered the scene news of Guyon's marriage caused. "When she found out, Elene staged a tantrum which, I swear, shook these stone walls. She vowed no woman could take Guyon from her. But she is quite wrong. My brother loves you. Anyone can see that. You have no reason to fear Elene."

Brenna wanted desperately to believe her. The thought of Guyon in another woman's arms filled her with fury. It was bad enough to accept the fact that he had indulged in affairs before their marriage. To think that he might leave their bed to dally with another was more than she could bear. Acutely conscious of her own inexperience, and forgetting for the moment how much she clearly pleased her husband, Brenna murmured, "She is very beautiful. Few men would turn aside from the Lady Elene."

"That is true," Roanna admitted. "But Guyon has made his choice. He married you. It is not in his nature to be disloyal."

Perhaps not, Brenna thought several hours later when the entire court sat down to supper. Seated next to Guyon, she could not help but be reassured by his loving attention. His gaze rarely left her, their hands touched frequently, and his smile promised much for the coming night.

Yet Brenna was also well aware of Elene sitting some little distance away. Magnificently dressed and jeweled, the Norman lady looked even more beautiful than she had that afternoon. Several times,

Brenna caught her looking hungrily at Guyon. When Elene's eyes happened to meet hers, they narrowed dangerously. Brenna shivered as she felt the full magnitude of the other woman's hatred. She could not doubt that Elene was a dangerous enemy who would stop at nothing to destroy all her happiness.

Chapter Nine

Brenna tossed restlessly in the wide bed. She had sought sleep for hours, without success. Beyond the small room, the great keep was silent. Only the distant calls of the watch and the occasional fumbled step of some late reveler punctured the stillness. Silently, she counted off the rhythm of her own heartbeat. It seemed to her to have grown increasingly anxious with the passing of each solitary hour.

She had no way to judge the time, but knew it was very late. Her eyes, long accustomed to the darkness, caught the first faint glimmer of light beyond the narrow slit window. Not yet dawn, but the slow melting of darkness that precedes it. Desperately, she told herself yet again that whatever had caused the Duke to call his lords to council after supper must have been very important indeed. Certainly

important enough to keep them talking through the night.

So much talking would undoubtedly have caused a thirst. With great quantities of wine and ale consumed, it was not surprising that the men would have fallen asleep at table, forgetting for the moment those who waited for them.

If she were to don the robe laid out at the foot of the bed and slip downstairs, as she had been tempted to do so many times in the past hours, she would most likely find Guyon stretched out snoring near his Duke. But what if she did not? What if Guyon had found some other occupation that night?

Biting her lip so painfully as to draw blood, Brenna leaped from the bed. The robe wrapped loosely around her, she was almost to the door when caution intervened. She could not do this. If some early rising servant happened to see her, word would be all over the keep by midmorning that Guyon's young wife had felt constrained to go in search of him. He would be rightly angered by her presumption and the resulting ridicule. Moreover, her presence in the corridors at such an early hour, especially dressed in no more than a robe, could easily be misconstrued. However Guyon had chosen to occupy himself, it would not do for her to be suspected of visiting another man's chamber.

Frustrated, Brenna stalked to the window. The last stars were just twinkling out. Below in the bailey she could make out dim shapes and movement. A solitary rooster fluttered across the yard. Perched on the edge of a watering trough, it craned its long neck at the sky but did not yet crow. Scattered snorts and

whinnies drifted up from the stables as the horses began to rouse. From one of the huts huddled against the high stone walls, smoke began to rise. As she watched, a peasant emerged, yawning and scratching, to relieve himself.

Soon the whole keep would be stirring. Servants would hurry to light the kitchen fires and prepare food. Water would be heated and hauled upstairs for pampered guests who liked to bath and shave in privacy. Livestock would be fed and the constant, laborious process of preserving the recent harvest would continue under the Lady Matilda's watchful eye.

Breathing deeply, Brenna inhaled the sweet scents of drying herbs and rushes, the salty tang of newly slaughtered beef and pork laid down in brine, the moist, fecund aroma of ripening cheeses. Much the same activity would be going on at Winchester. Even this early, it was likely the Lady Edythe was at work. If she were still there, Brenna would be helping her, instead of standing unhappy and alone at a window overlooking a strange bailey, wondering where or with whom her husband lay.

Determined not to give in to self-pity, Brenna went back to the bed. Huddled under the covers, she did not expect to sleep. But exhaustion and worry took their toll. Without her even being aware of it, her eyes closed, the tension eased from her body, and she drifted into dreamless unconsciousness.

But not for long. The room was only a little lighter when Brenna next stirred. This time she was not alone. The hard, solid warmth of a well-recognized body pressed against hers. Guyon's right hand gently

caressed her breast and his lips nuzzled the nape of her neck.

"So sweet," he murmured, his other hand busy wrapping around her waist and pulling her even more tightly against him. Brenna started as she realized that before joining her in the bed, Guyon had stripped off all his clothes. Whatever he had been doing that night had apparently not dampened his ardor. On the contrary. She inhaled sharply as his manhood, hard and urgent, brushed her buttocks.

"I'm sorry to be so late, love. There was so much talking . . . no one could agree on anything. . . ." His voice trailed off as his mouth became better occupied. Brenna gasped as hot, moist lips closed on her nipple, tugging gently.

But even as she groaned with pleasure, the thought of Elene intervened to taunt her. Too clearly, Brenna saw the other woman eyeing Guyon with hungry purpose. That, and the memory of the long, miserable night she had spent alone combined to freeze her senses. Stiffening, Brenna pulled back a little way.

Instantly, Guyon ceased his voluptuous caress. Raising his head, he looked down at her in surprise. "Brenna," he questioned softly, "are you all right?"

His concern could not have been clearer. Nor could his determination to refrain from lovemaking if Brenna did not share his desire. In the face of such loving consideration, her resentment wavered. "I'm quite well," she murmured huskily against his throat. "It's just that . . ."

* * *

Reassured that she was not ill, and almost unbearably incited by the passionate response of her lovely body, Guyon returned without further ado to pleasuring his wife. Skillful, callused hands ran the length of her, sending shivers of delight radiating from a hot inner core.

Helplessly, Brenna arched against him as a moan broke from deep within her throat. Slender arms embraced him, drawing his taut, muscled length closer still. Their legs entwined, smooth, satiny skin rubbing longingly against hair-roughened sinew. Guyon gasped as a velvet inner thigh brushed his straining hardness.

Having studiously applied herself to learning what best gave her husband pleasure, Brenna was now quite adept at arousing and sustaining his passion. Before Guyon could guess her intent, she wiggled free of his arms. Small but surprisingly strong hands pressed him into the mattress. Straddling him on her knees, Brenna trailed fiery kisses down his chest. With kittenish strokes, her tongue teased into his navel, eliciting a purely male groan of delight. Now fully erect, Guyon tried to regain control of the situation. But his attempt to return Brenna to her back failed when she fought him determinedly. Giving up, he graciously allowed her to have her way.

Were there women, Brenna wondered dazedly, who did not luxuriate in the special beauty of their husband's bodies? How sad for them. She found intense delight in every inch of Guyon's flesh. His taste, feel, scent—all thrilled her. Best of all, she relished the response she provoked when her small

hand cupped the pouch beneath his manhood and squeezed gently, when her tongue ran around the arching tip of him before drawing down to caress him with her throat in the way that never failed to shatter his control.

Guyon bore it through long, exquisite minutes until at last a harsh growl burst from him. "Enough!" Iron hands tangled in her hair, pulling her upward. Lifted clear, Brenna was at once impaled on his manhood as with a single, joyful thrust he sought the farthest depth of her. More than ready to receive him, she whimpered in delight as rippling waves of pleasure coursed through her.

When that first small storm had passed, Brenna steadied herself above him. Smiling down at Guyon through the unruly mass of her glistening hair, she held herself absolutely still. Only her powerful inner muscles moved, pulsating in an ancient rhythm that quickly brought him to the edge of rapture.

Perfectly gauging his endurance, Brenna drew back. Balanced just on the tip of his hardness, she teased him with undulating waves as the rosy peak of her breast found its way inside his mouth. Guyon was not content merely to suckle her. Unwilling to be outdone in their sweet combat, he reached an expert hand down to where she was so finely perched. Revealing the most exquisitely sensitive point of her, he began rapid, unrestrained strokes at the same time his lips and tongue continued to work her nipple.

Spasms of delight shot through her. All thought of teasing vanished as her body closed round him,

drawing him deeper and deeper. Securing both hands on her hips, Guyon drove upward. Lost in mindless ecstasy, they exploded together. The fierce pulsing of his manhood within her sent Brenna spiraling over the edge and beyond. She lost all sense of herself as separate from Guyon. They were a single being shooting heavenward. Consciousness splintered into a thousand whirling lights before at last dissolving into the mist of utter release.

Much later, when Brenna recovered sufficiently to form clear thoughts, she conceded silently that if Guyon had been dallying with the Lady Elene, the woman had been cheated. Inexperienced though she might be, common sense reassured her that no man lately come from his mistress's bed could perform so ardently with his wife. So it was more than likely that Guyon had indeed been with the Duke. But knowing that did not entirely banish her resentment for the pain of the past night.

The joy they found together was fleeting. When they at last rose to breakfast and dress, Guyon's expression was closed, his thoughts clearly elsewhere. There were none of the fond looks and touches they usually shared after making love. His failure even to notice Brenna's lingering reproachfulness piqued her further.

Nor was she soothed when he returned his attention to her long enough to compliment the beauty of her dress. "I have always found you lovely," he said, eyes wandering over her appreciatively. "But your Anglo-Saxon clothes did nothing for you. Norman fashions suit you far better." Running a light hand down the silken smoothness of her leaf green tunic,

he added, "It's just as well we have to stay in Falaise awhile. The needlewomen here are highly skilled and can make you a suitable wardrobe."

Unlocking a wooden strongbox, Guyon dropped a pouch of coins on the bed. "That should take care of whatever you need. But if it doesn't, just tell me." A proprietary smile curved his firm mouth. "You please me far too much to wish anything but the best for you."

At another time, Brenna might have appreciated such flattery. Lost in a haze of love, through which she had lately perceived the world, she might even have marveled at such thoughtful anticipation of her needs. But in her present mood, she did no more than glare at him. "I am used to having my own money, and spending it as I will. Don't expect me to run to you for every little thing."

"Lord Harold did mention something about properties your father settled on you," Guyon said, frowning. "I suppose you draw on the rents from them. But such matters are handled differently here. Women do not own property or control wealth of any kind."

"I know that," Brenna snapped, brushing her hair rather more vigorously than was required. Her failure to protest such an abysmal system earlier provoked her at least as much as Guyon's presumption that she would accept complete financial dependency without objection. Impulsively, she added, "At home we often spoke of how poorly the Normans treat their women. They are considered children all their lives and never allowed to make the smallest decision for themselves. And why not, since they

have no value except giving pleasure and producing heirs? At least in England we are valued for something more than our bodies!"

"Would you prefer I did not value your body?" Guyon asked, his voice dangerously soft. Coming to stand before her, he turned her by the shoulders until she had no choice but to face him. "Your body, at least, seemed well-pleased by what just passed between us."

"How like you to remind me of that!" Brenna exclaimed. Her face flushed but she refused to look away from him. Proudly, her gaze met his. "If you imagine lovemaking and the promise of pretty clothes will keep me complacent, think again. I am no fluff-brained simperer to be bedded when you will and ignored the rest of the time. You go off and leave me in a strange place all night, with no idea of where you were, or who you were with and then you expect me to just . . ."

Brenna broke off, stopped by Guyon's fierce scowl. "I will have no shrew for a wife," he informed her coldly. "Nor will I dance attendance on you and explain my every move. For both our sakes, I have responsibilities which must be fulfilled. You will accept that, without any more displays of temper, or I will show you exactly how poorly a Norman can treat his woman!"

The threat was an empty one, since Guyon knew full well he could never do Brenna the slightest harm. She knew it too, but just then she preferred to believe otherwise. "Threaten me, will you! Why you—"

"Enough!" Moving nimbly, Guyon just managed to avoid the small foot intent on kicking him. "I have

better things to do than linger with a bad-tempered witch! Sweeten yourself before we meet again, madam, or it will go all the worse for you!"

Brenna winced as the heavy wood door cracked shut behind him. For several minutes she stood in the center of the room, fists clenched, entertaining dark thoughts about men in general and one in particular. That mood did not last long. Regret filled her. She and Guyon had never argued since their marriage, and the experience left her shaken. She wished for all the world that she could call him back, apologize for her hasty words, and explain that she was only upset by all the newness, the need to adjust to so much, and most of all, by the troublesome presence of the Lady Elene who hung like an evil cloud over all her thoughts.

In her fantasy, Guyon would soothe away all her fears, explaining that whatever he had shared with the Norman woman was truly finished and that there would be none other for him save his wife. But, of course, that was not to be. He was already gone to join his Duke on the training field and she had no choice but to go down to the Great Hall alone.

As though Brenna's mood was not low enough, she had no sooner descended from the angle staircase than she encountered the Lady Elene emerging from chapel. Confronted by a vision in blue and white, perfect skin glowing warmly, large sapphire eyes seemingly wide and innocent, her back stiffened. No matter how she felt, the woman would not get the better of her.

"Did you not sleep well, Lady Brenna?" Elene inquired with honeyed insincerity. "You look positively haggard."

Under such an obvious attack, Brenna's anger eased a little. She understood perfectly well that, despite the argument which followed, Guyon's lovemaking had achieved its usual effect. She radiated the contentment of a well-satisfied woman. Realizing that Elene would prefer torture to any acknowledgment of a rival's beauty, Brenna could not resist a small dig.

"I am but newly wed," she murmured with a becomingly modest downward cast of her eyes, "and my lord Guyon is so . . . vigorous. You can hardly expect me to sleep much."

Dark splotches appeared on Elene's damask cheeks. Inhaling sharply, she hissed, "Vigorous, was he? After his meeting with the Duke, I'm surprised he went anywhere near you. Even Guyon's sensibilities, lacking though they are, should have kept him away. Or was he simply eager to reassert ownership, before you had reason to rue ever setting eyes on him?"

"W-what are you talking about?" Brenna stammered. Elene's strange hints that the Duke's affairs somehow touched on Brenna were more than the younger woman had bargained for. A little catty parlay could be quite enjoyable, especially since the residual satisfaction of Guyon's lovemaking made her feel more confident of holding her own. But Elene was clearly out for blood, with weapons at her disposal Brenna could not even suspect.

"I realize Guyon must have some hitherto unrevealed fascination with innocence," Elene drawled, "or he would certainly never have married you. But did he have to settle for such remarkable ignorance as well?" Pretending to consider the question, she

looked Brenna up and down insolently. "Yes . . . I suppose it is better that you're so naive. You look healthy enough to be an adequate brood mare. As long as you're too stupid to do anything but spread your legs at his slightest whim, he'll be quite content."

"How dare you!" Brenna seethed, all pretense at worldly patter gone. Never in all her life had she so wanted to strike out at another person. Her small hands clenched into fists, ready and more than willing to wipe the satisfied smirk from Elene's haughty face.

Before the confrontation could escalate to an unfortunate conclusion that would have kept the court gossiping for weeks, a mocking laugh distracted both women. Amber eyes sparkled dangerously as Roanna stepped between her sister-in-law and Guyon's erstwhile mistress.

"Out of chapel already, Elene? I'd have thought you would be in there hours yet, praying for all sorts of unseemly things."

Without giving the startled Elene a chance to respond, she turned to Brenna, bestowing a warm smile on the ashen-faced girl. "How do you manage to look so lovely this early in the morning? Especially after Guyon has just dragged you across the Channel and half the width of Normandy with scarcely a pause for breath. Of course, we must be tolerant of my brother," she added, her smile tightening as she regarded Elene. "He has always known what is of true value, and never hesitates to claim it for his own."

Roanna shared her brother's instinct for protectiveness. She would not permit Elene to wound her

sister-in-law, especially since she was already so fond of her. When word came of Guyon's sudden marriage, Roanna was at first amazed and then worried. She loved her brother dearly and thought him worthy of the greatest happiness. Yet she also had no illusions about the ability of men to make sensible judgments regarding women. She feared he might somehow, despite all his experience, have fallen for some clever, hard-edged fortune hunter who would make his life a misery.

Brenna came as a great relief. From the moment they met, Roanna understood full well why her brother had so speedily wed the beautiful English girl. She was a delight—lovely to look at, intelligent, high-spirited, and with an inner core of strength that would carry her through the greatest difficulties. Her decision to do everything possible to ease Brenna's adjustment to Norman life was absolute and irrevocable. No one, least of all the Lady Elene, would be allowed to threaten the marriage Roanna approved of so highly.

"Lady Matilda was looking for you," Roanna coolly advised the object of her displeasure. "Something about deciding you should help on the new tapestry."

Muttering about her serving women needing instruction, Elene hastily took herself off.

"Pay no attention to her," Roanna advised when she and Brenna were alone. "She's been spoiled rotten all her life and can't get used to the idea that she's actually going to be denied something she made up her mind to have."

"Is she . . . ?" Brenna murmured. Much as she appreciated Roanna's kindness, her mind was still

on the strange things Elene had been saying. She wished Roanna hadn't intervened quite when she did. The suggestion that Guyon had some reason for believing his wife might turn against him plagued her. Even as she told herself that Elene would tell any lie to cause trouble, she asked, "That meeting with the Duke last night, do you know what it was about?"

Roanna looked at her hesitantly. She was by nature honest and forthright. Deception did not come easily. But her loyalty to her brother, and her wish to see him happy, overrode all else. Slowly, she said, "Duke William frequently meets with his lords at odd hours. When he has some idea he wants to discuss, he can't sleep until it is done. Why Guyon has said many times that Lord William has no sense of day or night, let alone any need for rest. Just because he kept them talking so late doesn't mean anything really important is happening."

Brenna was not convinced. Beneath her sister-in-law's words, she heard too much that was not being said. Even her short acquaintance with the Duke was enough to tell her that he did not keep his men chatting idly. Something was definitely in the wind, and it touched on her in a way she could not decipher.

Roanna was too well schooled in the intricacies of court politics to say any more than she wished. Despite careful prodding, Brenna learned nothing of substance. But she was left with the indefinable impression that the previous night's meeting was important to her, and determined to discover exactly how. Her efforts were forestalled when the two girls

joined the Duchess, who kindly offered to show Brenna around the great keep of Falaise.

Roanna, cheerfully admitting she had never paid as much attention as she should to household details, asked to come along. "Now that Guyon is married, I won't have to concern myself at all with running his manor. But out of mercy for the poor man who will one day end up wed to me, I suppose I should try to learn something."

Brenna strove quickly to disabuse her sister-in-law of the idea that her help would not be welcomed, and in fact greatly needed, once they all returned to Guyon's holding. "It's true that I ran my father's home in Norfolk, but that was very small and easily managed. Lady Edythe taught me much while I was at Winchester, but I am certain there is a great deal I do not know. Especially about the Norman way of doing things."

"It can't be too different from your own," Matilda assured her. "After all, women both here and in England face the same problems. Men go off to fight or hunt and come home hungry. More often than not they are also wet, injured, tired, and out of sorts. Their needs must be seen to and their tempers soothed. Run your household to undo, or better yet prevent the mischief of men and you will be regarded as a paragon. Provided, of course, that you never let them guess you view them as wayward children inclined to become fretful."

Chuckling at this indisputable truth, the women made their way across the bailey to the dyers' huts where newly woven linen and wool were being transformed into gloriously colored fabrics. Once winter set in, castle ladies and servants alike would be busy

sewing clothing, wall-hangings, and bed-coverings. Then they would be glad of the work that could be done inside. But with the weather still warm, it was far pleasanter to find occupations beyond the castle walls. Matilda cast an experienced eye over the dyeing vats set over carefully tended fires. Small boys and girls stood by with long wooden poles to stir the contents. Nearby long drying racks stood festooned with blue, green, red, and yellow yardage blowing gently in the breeze.

More than one man watched as the ladies moved among the rainbow-hued racks. The Duchess possessed rare dignity and grace which, even without the added incentive of her rank, would command respect. But it was the young women with her who received the most intent glances. Each in her own way was remarkably beautiful. From both radiated an extraordinary sense of strength and passion, as well as an inner gentleness few men could resist. Even as the pace of activity throughout the bailey seemed not to alter, a ripple of sensual awareness ran through the battle-honed knights.

About to mount his destrier, Guyon paused to gaze at Brenna. Momentarily forgetting the temperamental war horse, he savored the lovely picture she made. Ebony hair cascaded to her waist beneath a transparent veil. In deference to the warm weather, her surcoat was thin, hiding little more than the form-fitting tunic worn under it. Alert to the attention of the other men, Guyon frowned. He was not at all displeased that his wife should be admired, but neither would he tolerate for an instant any effort to turn such admiration into action.

Remembrance of the passionate interlude they

had shared that morning sent a surge of heat through his body. It was followed quickly by regret for the argument that so puzzled him. He understood that Brenna was a proud woman who would naturally be displeased by her sudden loss of all freedom. But he sensed there was something more beneath her tirade. Sighing, he wished they could spend more time together so that he could help ease her through the transition to Norman life while reassuring her of his love. But the Duke demanded his attention and he could not shirk his duties to him.

Regretfully, he fought back the impulse to ride to Brenna's side, scoop her up on his powerful stallion, and take her off for a languorous, love-filled day alone among the still-verdant trees and the year's last wildflowers. They would make love and talk, telling each other their deepest thoughts. He would reveal all that concerned him most, even to the darkening shape of Duke William's ambitions which he feared might all too soon drive a wedge of hatred into their marriage.

But such a course, however desirable, could not be. Beyond the simple fact that his absence would draw unwanted attention, he was not yet ready to subject Brenna's feelings to such a profound challenge. All too soon she would have to know. He could only pray that by then her love and trust would be strong enough to survive the terrible pain he feared he could not spare her.

Chapter Ten

THE STABLES SMELLED PLEASANTLY OF HAY, HORSES, and old weathered wood. Late afternoon light, filtering through the narrow windows, softened the contours of posts, troughs, and tackle. The quiet nickering of horses, the occasional swish of a fly-swatting tail, and the distant voices of grooms hurrying off to their dinner were the only sounds.

Moving between the rows of stalls, Guyon paused to breathe deeply. After a hectic day on the training field, followed by a very private, very troubling meeting with the Duke, he needed a moment to relax. It was all happening much faster than he had expected.

Pausing to make sure his destrier had been properly rubbed down and watered, he went on to that part of the stables housing the wirier, less spirited palfreys used for travel. The chestnut stallion recognized

him and whinnied softly. Guyon patted him affectionately as he quickly and expertly checked the horse over. The journey he had just been told to make for the Duke would not be particularly long or rigorous. But it had to be done with great speed. There would be no time to spare for a damaged hoof or pulled tendon.

Satisfied that the horse was in good condition, Guyon confirmed that his saddle, stirrups, and other tackle were also ready. In the morning, a servant would pack provisions and an extra blanket in the saddle bags. His squire would wake early to polish sword and scabbard, and check the chain mail for any breakage among the metal links or tears on the toughened leather. By dawn, Guyon expected to be on the road north. Reluctant to think of how he would explain his departure to Brenna, he kept his mind firmly on the news he might well bring back. If the messenger from England said what the Duke expected, this journey would only be the prelude to another, far more dangerous venture.

Deep in thought, Guyon did not hear the slight sound behind him. Only when it came closer did his warrior's instincts suddenly spring to life, causing him to whirl around with his hand on the butt of his sword.

Elene laughed nervously. "Why, my lord, you act as though I were some enemy. Granted there has been combat between us, but of a far sweeter sort than requires your sword."

In the dim light of the stable, Elene's alabaster skin shone palely. Her white tunic worn under a blue surcoat hugged each curve of her voluptuous body.

Sapphire eyes sparkled as they swept over Guyon, taking in every inch of his hard, muscular length.

Moving closer, Elene murmured, "I've missed you, my lord. We were not always such strangers."

Not one to retreat even under the most difficult circumstances, Guyon stood his ground. But his hands shot out instinctively to prevent her from coming any nearer. "Whatever we were, my lady," he said coldly, "happened before my marriage. Need I remind you that I have a wife now, who commands my loyalty as well as my love?"

"Love! That whey-faced child? Don't jest with me. We both know she can't possibly satisfy you."

A flush darkened Guyon's chiseled cheekbones. "Be very careful what you say of the Lady Brenna," he warned. "I will hear no ill of her."

"Then I'll speak no more of the mealy-mouthed bitch," Elene shot back. "She isn't the reason I'm here." Her voice softened as she added imploringly, "Oh, Guyon, how can you forget the pleasures we shared? Did they mean so little to you? I can't believe that. You were ever so ardent . . . so tender . . . I know you meant for there to be far more between us."

"You know nothing!" Guyon sneered, anger at the insult to his wife driving out any instinct for chivalry. "You mistake plain lust for some far greater emotion. And you presume upon my common sense if you think I ever saw you as anything more than a willing bedmate."

"You wanted to marry me once!" Elene cried, forgetting for the moment that she had planned to be lovely and seductive. Her voice rose an octave. "You

longed to make me your wife. You thought the sun and moon revolved around me. Bedmate, indeed! I was far more to you, my lord, and I do not believe for a moment that you have forgotten."

"That is true," Guyon agreed with deceptive softness. "I have forgotten nothing." Taking a step toward her, his eyes flashed threatening. "Not your greed, your ambition, your insatiable appetite for wealth and power. I have forgotten none of it, madame. You swore yourself in love with me, then chose to wed an old, withered man who could keep you in luxury. No sooner were you married, than you proved yourself the whore by seeking to cuckold your husband. I have no doubt that when you found me unwilling, you wasted no time offering yourself to others more obliging." Leaning closer, he snarled, "You have all the instincts of a cat in heat. I thank God I found a woman whose beauty and passion are matched by honor. You are not fit to touch the hem of her gown. If I ever hear you have disturbed her in any way, you will wish yourself in hell rather than endure my wrath!"

Elene's painted mouth dropped open in disbelief. Never had she imagined Guyon could speak to her like that. True, he might pretend reluctance about resuming their relationship. She knew he still nurtured some ill feeling for her marriage to a wealthy lord when he was still struggling to establish himself. But she had been confident of swiftly overcoming any desire he might have to punish her. After all, hadn't he been her lover again after her husband's death?

"You did not mind bedding me after I was widowed," she reminded him fiercely. "If I was a cat in

heat, you more than met my desires. Why I remember nights when we . . ."

"You were available," Guyon broke in cynically. "And I do not for a moment deny you are very . . . adept. Why shouldn't I have enjoyed what you so eagerly thrust at me? But I never doubted I would one day find something far better. Now that I have, you would be well advised to keep your distance." Topaz eyes swept over her scathingly. "Your charms have paled, madame. I wouldn't bed you now for all the gold in Christendom."

"I don't believe you!" Elene screamed, stamping her foot against the hard-packed ground. His brutal derision swept away the last remnants of her caution. "You can't want her more than me! You can't! She's nothing . . . a stupid, little girl who can't do anything for you but breed! For God's sake, Guyon, I loved you!"

Without giving him a chance to respond, Elene pressed herself to him fervently. Hot, eager hands ran over his powerful shoulders and back. Slender nostrils flared as she breathed in the heady male scent of sweat and sun. Trembling, Elene rubbed her breasts against his rock-hard chest, not caring that his rough tunic chafed the nipples only lightly covered by her tunic and surcoat.

Every instinct within Guyon yearned to thrust her away. He felt nothing but the most profound disgust. It was difficult even to recall that he had once willingly possessed this woman. Compared to Brenna's exquisite sensuality, Elene was a straining, lusting animal who aroused only repulsion.

Only his deeply imbued distaste for using his strength against someone weaker kept him from

throwing her to the ground. Fists clenched at his sides, Guyon fought down the impulse to violence. Once he was certain he could control himself, he would put her from him and explain in terms even Elene could not forget that he never wanted her to come near him again.

But he didn't get the chance. Just as his hands reached for her, Elene raised herself on tiptoe, pressing her mouth to his. Before Guyon could recoil in disgust, he heard a gasp of horror from the direction of the stable door.

Brenna stood watching them, hands clasped tightly in front of her, her face drained of color, and her lips trembling uncontrollably. Worried by Guyon's absence from the hall after the other men returned, she had gone looking for him. The long hours they were apart had cooled her resentment and made her regret even more deeply the harsh words between them that morning. Driven by the need to tell him of her remorse, she searched out a squire who told her Lord Guyon was most likely in the stables. Hoping that since it was the dinner hour, they would find a few minutes' privacy, Brenna went there gladly. Only to discover her husband kissing the Lady Elene, their bodies pressed so closely together as to not allow for the passage of a flea between them.

Blinded by tears, Brenna turned and fled. She could not bear to see the enactment of her worst doubts. How had she believed, even for a moment, that she could win Guyon over a woman as beautiful and desirable as Elene? All the happiness she had known since her marriage lay shattered as she ran across the bailey and up the stairs to the great stone keep.

Choking on her sobs, Brenna did not hear Guyon's hoarse shout. She had no awareness of his swift tread following her, or of the curious stares of lords and ladies alike as she hurried through the hall. Her breath came in harsh gasps as she climbed the steep staircase to the second floor. Only when she was at last safe in their room did Brenna's desperate strength give way to grief.

Collapsed on the bed, she wept hopelessly. Tension building in her throughout the weeks since her sudden marriage and removal to a strange land gáve way at last in scalding tears. So intense was her grief that Guyon entered the room and repeated her name several times before his presence penetrated. When it did, Brenna burrowed further into the bed, moaning, "G-go away . . ."

"Brenna, listen to me," Guyon entreated, kneeling beside the bed and trying to turn her to him. "What you saw meant nothing. Elene was just being . . . obstinate. There is nothing between us. You must believe me."

Brenna barely heard him. The image of Elene embracing him repeated over and over in her fevered mind. The woman's mocking words of the day before and that morning rose to taunt her. At that moment, it seemed perfectly sensible that Guyon would try to make her believe Elene was no longer his mistress. If only for the sake of peace in his own household, he would have to pretend otherwise. But she recalled the great ardor and skill of his lovemaking and told herself such a man would never be satisfied with a single woman, especially not one so young and inexperienced.

"Go away!" Brenna repeated more sharply. Rage

was beginning to block out anguish. How dare Guyon make such a mockery of all they shared! He left no doubt that he expected her to be absolutely faithful in thought as well as deed, yet wasted no time resuming his own liaison with another woman. Convinced that such duplicity was but one more example of Norman contempt for women, Brenna lashed out fiercely. "Don't touch me, you lecherous cur! If you think I'll take the leavings of that . . . that harlot, you're very much mistaken!"

Guyon stiffened. Dropping his hands, he stood up. His eyes were hooded as he took in Brenna's bared teeth and flushed cheeks.

"So much for wifely trust!" he derided contemptuously. "You've already tried and found me guilty. And is this my punishment, that I not touch you?" His firm lips parted in a pained sneer. "So be it, madame. Be assured, I will not touch you again until I am convinced you are worthy of my regard. Your bitter suspicion and hot temper are enough to cool any man's ardor!"

As he had that morning, Guyon left their room angrily, slamming the door shut behind him. Brenna lay for a long time without moving. Slowly, her tears died away, as did her fury. In their place came the first stirrings of contrition. Whatever else he might be, Guyon was right about her temper. Added to the natural insecurity she felt as a young bride in a foreign land, it had caused her to jump to conclusions that might possibly not be warranted.

Sniffling, Brenna sat up slowly. Her head throbbed and her eyes burned. She felt bruised all over. In such a state, she could not bear to face Guyon, much less the court. There was no possibili-

ty of her going down to supper, when a single bite would choke her. Nor could she imagine Guyon returning to their room to sleep. If she was wrong and he was not Elene's lover, then he would undoubtedly bed down in the Great Hall with the other men. What their reaction would be, Brenna did not care to imagine. Wearily, she subsided back against the bolster. Morning would be soon enough to seek her husband out and learn once and for all if her fears had any basis in reality.

But by morning he was gone.

Brenna heard the news from her sister-in-law. "Duke William has sent him north on some mission," Roanna explained gently when she accompanied the servant bringing Brenna's breakfast. Waiting until they were alone, she smiled reassuringly. "I'm sure he won't be gone long. Not more than a few days."

"He didn't tell me . . ." Brenna murmured, unable to meet Roanna's eyes. Her distraught progress through the Great Hall, with Guyon in hasty pursuit, must certainly be common knowledge. Yet the older girl offered no reproach. Beckoning her to sit down and eat, Roanna said, "Don't be worried about him. I haven't been able to find out exactly where he's gone or why, but no one seems to think there's any danger. So let's just enjoy the next few days." Her smile deepened. "We'll spend the time preparing your wardrobe. When Guyon returns, you will dazzle him. He'll forget all about missions for the Duke and . . . other matters. . . ."

Brenna agreed numbly. The "other matters" Roanna referred to suddenly seemed so unimportant. All that mattered was that Guyon was not

there. Without him, it seemed as though some vital part of herself was cut away. What was left would have to get by as best it could until he returned.

For all Roanna's reassurance, the next few days passed with excruciating slowness. Brenna slept little, tossing fitfully in the wide bed. When she did manage to drift into unconscious, it was to dream of an angry, scornful Guyon accusing her of never having loved him. Shadows appeared under her eyes and the color fled from her cheeks. Her step grew listless. Despite both Roanna and the Lady Matilda's best efforts to keep her occupied, rarely an hour passed that she did not berate herself for being a sour-tempered, jealous shrew. No one would blame Guyon if he lingered on his journey. What man would want to return to such a wife, who offered him neither trust nor understanding?

Swamped in self-loathing, Brenna did not notice that the Lady Elene was absent from court. With her usual quiet determination the Duchess had discovered exactly what transpired in the stables. Infuriated by such blatant disregard for the most basic rules of propriety, Matilda made it clear she expected Elene to visit her own estates. Her presence would not again be tolerated at Falaise until the newlyweds were well and truly reunited.

Although the Duke was normally close-mouthed about state affairs, he relented enough under his wife's prodding to admit that Guyon was due back in a week. On the appointed day, Brenna rose early. Aware that her appearance had suffered, she dressed with particular care. Lady Matilda, taking pity on her, kept her well occupied in the weaving

rooms all morning. The afternoon passed more slowly, spent as it was in the solar doing needlework with the other ladies. As dusk began to fall, Brenna's eyes met Roanna's. Silently, the two young women acknowledged that Guyon would apparently not arrive that day.

When he had still not returned three days later, even the Duke began to feel concern. Quietly, so as not to increase alarm, he dispatched two knights to follow Guyon's route and see if they could find him. The mission itself was important enough to make any delays worrisome. But beyond that, he dreaded the thought of some evil befalling the young man he regarded almost as a brother. Moreoever, he was moved to genuine compassion by Brenna's increasingly anguished vigil.

"Horse probably threw a shoe," William declared one evening at supper. "He might have trouble getting another. That could be a problem even for a man as resourceful as Guyon."

Roanna and Matilda hastily agreed, but Brenna knew such an explanation was unlikely. Guyon had ridden almost since infancy. He was never careless with his horses, and was more than capable of reshoeing a mount should it be necessary. Granted, there might have been some other accident. Even the most expert rider did not always sidestep every rabbit hole and rut in Normandy's well-traveled roads. If the horse had fallen, perhaps breaking a leg, Guyon would have been thrown. . . .

Fighting back her fear, Brenna managed to swallow a few mouthfuls of supper. She had no idea what she ate, nor did she pay any further attention to the

conversation. Only when a weary, travel-stained knight entered the hall and approached the Duke did the silent agony of her thoughts break off.

The knight bent down beside William and whispered urgently. The Duke rose. He paused to say a few words to the Lady Matilda before walking quickly from the Hall with the knight following.

A slight, barely perceptible gesture brought the chief steward to Matilda's side. In a voice too low to be overheard, she gave some instruction. The man nodded and hurried off, summoning several servants to go with him.

Catching Roanna's eye, the Duchess said gently, "Lady Brenna, your lord has returned. He is outside." As Brenna jumped up, Matilda placed a restraining hand on her arm. "I must tell you, dear, he has been hurt. The knights who found him aren't sure how it happened, but they fear he has lost a great deal of blood. Fortunately, they were able to get him back here where he will have the best possible care."

Brenna barely heard her. After registering the single fact that Guyon was injured, her mind ceased to function on any but the most instinctive level. Tearing herself free of the Duchess, she ran from the Hall.

Several servants and the Duke himself were helping Guyon from his horse. In the flickering light of tar torches, his face was ashen. Dried blood stained his chain mail just beneath his heart. Another gash cut across his forehead. His left arm hung limply at his side. He swayed against the Duke, barely able to stand upright.

Brenna stopped several yards from him. By a

supreme effort of will, she forced her terror down. An hysterical wife would be no good at all to Guyon. She must remain calm and remember everything Edythe had taught her about healing.

Unaware of Matilda and Roanna hurrying up behind her, Brenna took a deep breath. Drawing on courage she had not known she possessed, she went to her husband. Sliding his right arm over her shoulders, she unobstrusively added her strength to the Duke's. Together, they began easing Guyon up the steps to the keep.

Some awareness of where he was must have penetrated the haze of pain. His eyes flickered, then opened wider. Lips cracked by fever parted slightly. "B-Brenna . . ."

What color remained in his blood- and grime-stained face faded. Cradled between his wife and his duke, Guyon fainted.

Chapter Eleven

"You must get some rest," Roanna murmured gently. "It will do Guyon no good if you become ill."

Brenna did not respond. All her attention was focused on the man lying so still and helpless before her. Since collapsing on the steps of the keep two nights before, Guyon had not regained consciousness. Alternating fits of raging fever and shivering chills tore through him. In the throes of delirium, he had to be forcibly restrained. Gravely injured though he was, his strength remained immense. Brenna and several servants sported bruises from their frantic efforts to keep him covered when he was cold, sponge him down when the fever surged, change his bandages, and whenever possible spoon a nourishing broth into him.

Roanna, Matilda, and those castle ladies most skilled at healing all took their turn by the bed. But

it was Brenna who remained there constantly, refusing to leave his side for even a moment. When exhaustion claimed her, she slept kneeling on the floor with her head resting against Guyon's outflung hand. The slightest sound or movement from him was enough to bring her instantly awake.

"The wound on his chest has begun to suppurate," she said wearily, not looking at her sister-in-law. They both knew that the worst danger came not from the injuries themselves or even the loss of blood, but from the infections they were powerless to prevent. As the skin around the wounds became hard and red, they could only try to draw out the pus without harming Guyon further.

"Is the poultice helping?" Roanna asked, eyes dark with worry as she studied her brother.

Brenna shook her head. "I know the Lady Matilda has used it before to good effect. But this time, it just isn't working."

"Perhaps in a day or two . . ."

Brenna didn't comment, but privately she thought that in a day or two it could be too late. Edythe, who was renowned for being able to heal those others thought lost, had warned her often of the danger in allowing a fever to continue very long. In the silence of the little room, Brenna could almost hear her sister saying, "Fever drains the body. If it isn't stopped quickly, it can kill as surely as any sword. And even when the patient does recover from a long fever, he is frequently never the same. I have seen men so weakened in body they could not stand, and so destroyed in mind that they were as babies once again."

Exhausted after a night of almost constant deliri-

um, Guyon was temporarily quiet. Driven to the brink of reason by his tortured ramblings—many of which concerned his love for her and his terrible pain at her lack of trust—Brenna was using the lull to try to pull herself together. She could not postpone a decision much longer.

A movement in a corner of the room caught her eye. She glanced up at the priest still kneeling before the *prie-dieu*. At least one of the castle priests had been present ever since Guyon was brought into the room. For the most part, they were unobtrusive. Aside from a few murmured words of comfort, they prayed silently. Downstairs in the chapel, other priests were also praying through the long hours. Grateful though she was for their succor, Brenna knew the priest's presence could rapidly become awkward.

Wincing from the pain of stiffened muscles, she rose and went to the man. Managing a gentle smile, Brenna whispered, "My lord is resting more easily now. Perhaps you would like to get some supper?"

Surprised, the priest looked at her hesitantly. He was a young man very conscious of the honor of being in the Duke's household and well aware of the affection his master had for Guyon D'Arcy. It would hardly do to leave the injured lord if he was in any danger. On the other hand, he was very tired and hungry, and the lady seemed quite sincere. . . .

"If you're sure it would be all right," he murmured hopefully.

"Quite sure," Brenna promised. "I am certain your prayers are being heard, but you will need strength to continue them. It would make me feel

much better if you would take some rest and nourishment."

Flattered by her concern, the priest agreed quickly. When he had left, Roanna looked at her in bewilderment. "Why did you send him away?"

Instead of answering, Brenna said, "I need hot water, clean bandages, and a knife. Can you get them for me?"

Nodding hesitantly, Roanna could not prevent herself from asking, "You mean to lance the wound, don't you? But why did you want the priest to go? Perhaps he could have helped?"

Too weary and concerned to indulge in long explanations, Brenna said only, "You will see why. Please just get what I asked for."

Ordinarily, Roanna would not have allowed herself to be kept ignorant of Brenna's intentions. But she respected her sister-in-law and knew beyond any doubt that she could be trusted. Delaying barely a moment, Roanna went swiftly from the room.

When she returned, alone despite her burdens, she said quietly, "The Lady Matilda is sleeping. The priest is in the kitchens, and the others are either in chapel or also eating. I don't think we will be disturbed for a while."

Brenna nodded gratefully. She had spent the last few minutes in silent prayer beside Guyon. If she was wrong, or not skilled enough . . . But she refused to think of that. Everything she knew, and every instinct she possessed, told her that to wait longer would be to invite tragedy. Her mind made up, she moved briskly.

First, she made a tincture from herbs stored in the

chest she had brought from England. Red in color and sharp to the scent, the liquid was known to kill if taken within the body. But spread outside, around a wound, it had some strange property that helped cure infection.

Pulling the covers back from Guyon, Brenna removed the blood- and pus-encrusted bandage with the poultice underneath and applied the tincture liberally. When the entire area of his chest around the wound was stained, she thoroughly washed her hands with lye soap and hot water. That done, she honed the small knife to razor sharpness. Satisfied that it could cut with absolute precision, Brenna took a deep breath and approached the bed.

"I still don't understand why you . . ." Roanna began, now more puzzled than ever. Her sister-in-law's actions were new to her, but by no means shocking. There seemed no reason to have sent the priest away.

"You will," Brenna said again. For just a moment, doubt shone in her eyes. If Roanna were to panic and raise an alarm . . .

Forcing that thought too from her mind, she moved forward to where a tall candle burned next to the bed. Raising the knife, Brenna thrust the blade into the flame. Roanna's eyes widened. Slowly, almost imperceptibly, a soft chant filled the room.

As the blade passed again and again through the flame, Brenna prayed in a language her sister-in-law had never heard. An ancient language which in the time beyond memory had been spoken throughout the land. With the coming of the Christian god, the old ways were almost extinguished. Only a few still

remembered. Like Edythe, who passed the knowledge on to Brenna.

When the prayer was done, the blade would be clean. It could then be used safely. Brenna was not sure why this was so. Perhaps putting steel into fire somehow appeased the old gods, so that they healed instead of harmed. Whatever the cause, she had seen the method work often enough to trust it absolutely. Guyon's life was at stake. She would not consider opening the wound without a purified knife. Raised in Christianity and as fearful as anyone else of the wrath of the Lord, she understood full well the enormity of what she was doing. Her appeal to the ancient gods was sacrilege. By it, she might be damning her soul to eternal perdition. But if that was what it took to heal Guyon, so be it.

Roanna watched her in mingled horror and fascination. With her midnight hair tumbling in tangled waves to her waist, and her gray-green eyes as wide and mysterious as the sea, Brenna looked like some ancient pagan priestess returned to life.

Guyon's blood stained her surcoat. Fire warmed her honeyed skin. Steel shone in the small but utterly determined hand that at last grew still.

"It's ready," Brenna breathed. "Hold him."

Roanna swallowed hard. She, too, knew full well what had just happened in the small, quiet room hidden high up in the stone keep. Should her sister-in-law's pagan tendencies ever become known, not even all of Guyon's fierce love would be enough to protect her. Brenna was very clearly risking her own life, and perhaps even more, to save her lord.

Humbled by the enormity of such selflessness,

Roanna obeyed. Without allowing herself to think, she grasped Guyon's massive shoulders and pressed them firmly to the mattress.

The first cut drove deep. Pus and dark blood oozed from the wound. A sour stench rose to foul the air. Guyon moaned fitfully. Brenna cut again, across the first slash to form a cross. Dropping the knife, she gently eased the flaps of skin apart. Roanna placed fresh cloths to catch the putrified liquid. Through long, anxious minutes, as Guyon tossed restlessly beneath their ministrations, the two girls worked to clean the wound. Only when the blood from it at last ran bright red was Brenna satisfied.

Dabbing a little more of the tincture into the gashes made by her knife, she quickly stitched the flaps closed. Time and Guyon's own strength would have to do the rest. Slumping with exhaustion, she watched as Roanna rebandaged her brother and placed the covers over him once more. No sooner had both young women subsided next to the bed than the door opened to readmit the priest.

"I have brought you some food, my lady," he said softly, placing a tray on the table near Brenna. His swift glance went to the man who seemed more restless than before. "Is something wrong?"

"No," Roanna said quickly. "My brother will naturally become more active as he recovers."

"Of course . . . I only thought . . . You have changed the bandage."

"It was dirty," Brenna murmured. Forcing herself to pretend some interest in the food, she thanked the priest for his thoughtfulness. He was not satisfied, though, until she swallowed some of the tender beef

and fragrant wine he had selected specially to tempt her. Roanna shared the meal, biting into a crusty roll as she eyed the priest anxiously.

The bloody knife Brenna had used still lay on the table. The candle still burned brightly. The very air seemed to reverberate to her pagan prayers. Did the old gods stir within the thick stone walls? Did forces Roanna hardly dared to contemplate move now within her brother?

If they did, the priest showed no awareness. Glad to have been able to do something for the noble ladies, he returned happily to his prayers. Brenna held her breath as the Latin incantations resumed. Would God show His displeasure at her profanity?

Nothing happened. The priest prayed, the food stayed in her stomach, and Guyon slept on. Sighing, Brenna felt the tension ease from her. She hardly knew when Roanna took the goblet from her and eased a blanket around her shoulders. Sleep came as a blessing, banishing her fears and restoring her courage.

Hours later Brenna stirred. Her head, cradled against Guyon's hand, lifted slowly. His skin was cool. Sitting up, Brenna touched his forehead. She felt the faint sheen of moisture on his face before noticing that the bedclothes were soaked. His fever had broken.

"R-Roanna," she rasped, "help me . . ." Instantly, the other girl was at her side. Together they lifted Guyon, easing the covers from under him. With the priest's help, he was gently dried and the bed remade. When that was done, Brenna found herself trembling so badly that she could not stand. The first faint rays of hope accomplished what all her terror

had not done. She could only sit helplessly as the priest wet Guyon's parched lips and Roanna hurried to summon the Duchess.

"Our prayers have been answered," Matilda breathed tearfully as she gazed down at the pale but no longer ashen face of the young man she had almost despaired of saving.

Brenna nodded mutely. She could not bring herself to speak. The knowledge that Guyon would recover so overwhelmed her that her throat closed painfully. It was left to Roanna to make the appropriate responses assuring the Duchess of their gratitude for her help and promising that the moment Guyon recovered consciousness, the Duke would be notified.

"I fear my brother will have little time to rest," she murmured when the room at last emptied out. "Lord William is pacing the floor right now, worrying about who attacked him and why. He sent more messengers north to try to discover what happened, but so far there has been no word."

Her words penetrated the haze of Brenna's relief. Until then, she had thought only of the desperate need to heal Guyon's injuries. There had been no time to consider how they had occurred. Now she said slowly, "There must have been more than one attacker. I can't believe that a single man could have overcome Guyon. The gash in his chest and his left arm were made by the same weapon. But something else struck his head. Perhaps a . . ."

She broke off. Color flooded her face, then receded sickly. Her stomach churned. The sound of her own horror-struck heartbeat resounded against the words she had been about to utter.

Once before she had seen a wound like the one on Guyon's forehead. It occurred when the Earl Harold's younger brother, Leofwine, grew careless on the training field and was grazed by a two-headed axe wielded by a comrade. The resultant injury was distinctive and unmistakable. As was the fact that the weapon was not used in Normandy. It remained the exclusive province of English lords. Even as Brenna tried desperately to convince herself she must be wrong, the dim outlines of Guyon's anonymous assailants began to sharpen and grow frighteningly clear.

Chapter Twelve

"I CANNOT TAKE YOU WITH ME," GUYON REPEATED. He lay on the bed, propped up by the bolster, sinewy legs crossed over each other and arms folded behind his head. Although this was his first day back on the training field since being injured, he looked surprisingly fit and strong. Only the still-healing gash on his chest remained to remind Brenna of the horror they had passed through.

Lying back in her bath, she eyed him lovingly. "Why not? It's bad enough for the Duke to send you away when you're still healing. I don't understand why you want to go alone."

"I won't be alone," Guyon explained patiently. The sight of her alabaster skin gleaming in the light from the braziers predisposed him to tolerance. Smiling, his gaze drifted over a feathery tendril of hair that escaped from the lustrous mass piled on top

of her head. For a few more minutes, it would be pleasant to anticipate what was to come after she bathed. Longer than that and he would have to find some way to coax her from the tub. His smile deepened. His beautiful wife would not be too difficult to convince. They had been so long without each other.

For weeks after the attack on him, Guyon was forced to remain in bed. Chafing at the weakness of his own body, he proved to be a miserable patient. It was difficult to know who was the more relieved when Brenna at last pronounced him fit to move around, with caution.

Weeks more passed before he could do more than stand or walk for short periods. The slightest exertion left him trembling with exhaustion even as he raged with frustration. Only frequent meetings with the Duke, during which they discussed in depth the political strategies which so fascinated them both, kept Guyon from losing his reason. Never in his life had he been forced to be immobile for so long. But then never before had he been so severely injured.

He frowned, thinking of the men who had come at him out of the darkness as he waited to meet the Duke's messenger. He had not seen their faces, but their weapons and their manner of fighting left no doubt of their origins. Determined to spare Brenna the knowledge that it was her countrymen who tried to kill him, he had turned aside her questions with a claim of forgetfulness. But he guessed she was not fooled. Something in the way she dropped the subject told him she already knew more than she wished.

A slender, alabaster leg propped on the side of the

tub to be soaped distracted him from painful memories of that night. Gratitude for the continuance of his life surged through him. Rising, he strolled over to the tub.

"You are clean enough, my lady."

For just a moment, Brenna pretended not to understand him. Luxuriating in the recovered sense of well-being, she was content to remain awhile longer at her bath. Or so she thought, until the teasing look she shot him settled on the turgid swelling of his manhood springing from its nest of golden curls.

A small gasp escaped her. "You seem fully recovered, my lord," she murmured thickly, not moving her eyes.

Guyon trailed a hard hand across the silken smoothness of her shoulder, just grazing the curve of her breast. He noted with satisfaction that her nipples were already hardening. "On the contrary. I find I have a pain which requires your *immediate* attention."

Brenna giggled at his emphasis. With true wifely endurance, she allowed herself to be lifted from the tub and toweled dry. The rough cloth moving against her silken skin coupled with Guyon's heady nearness sent shivers of delight through her. Long before he tossed the towel aside and lifted her to the bed, she was quivering in expectation.

He had lost some flesh in the last weeks. His chiseled cheekbones stood out more prominently. The hollows at the base of his corded neck seemed deeper. His shoulders and chest were still massive, the muscle and sinew developed from childhood almost indestructible. But his taut stomach was now

slightly concave and the bones of his hips jutted sharply.

Her passion heightened by tender awareness of his vulnerability, Brenna melted against him. Careful to avoid the still-healing wound on his chest, her hands and lips caressed and provoked and aroused in loving torment. After so many weeks of being nothing more than a nurse, it was exquisitely delightful to be once again woman and wife.

By the time Guyon gently eased her beneath him, she was vibrating with need. Every touch, every whispered love word, every instant increased her pleasure. Their coming together was a celebration of life and a reaffirmation of all they shared. Never before had Guyon been so tender, so patient. Despite the weeks without her, he held himself back until he was certain Brenna could endure no more. Only then did he plunge within her, his deep, slow strokes bringing them both to an explosion of ecstasy so intense as to make her sob with pleasure.

Weeping in sheer relief, Brenna burrowed her head against her husband's chest as the aftershocks of pleasure echoed through them. Wrapped in the golden cocoon of his love, all the horror of the last few weeks seemed faded to no more than a terrible dream. Blissfully content, Brenna slept, but only for a short time. Too soon the recollection that he was once again about to leave brought her awake.

"Guyon," she murmured tentatively, not wishing to disturb him if he slept.

"Hmm?"

"Do you really have to go to England?"

He laughed gently, arms tightening around her. "Duke William did not phrase it as a suggestion."

"But why?"

"I told you, to meet again with the King, as I did this past summer. Only this time," he teased, "there will be no beautiful, ebony-haired temptresses to take my mind off business."

"Of course there will," Brenna retorted. "Edward's court throngs with beautiful women. Why I saw myself how they glared at me and followed you with looks little more than decent."

"Brenna," Guyon began tightly, "you don't still think that I would . . ."

"Oh, no!" Raising herself, Brenna looked down at him entreatingly. "My lack of trust in you has shamed me. Believe that. I know the ladies of Edward's court may look all they like without ever receiving the slightest encouragement from you."

Reassured, Guyon relaxed again. He dreaded any return of Brenna's jealousy, even as he was somewhat flattered by it. It was good to know his wife cared for him so much. But he also needed her trust, especially since it was completely deserved.

"It is not because of the ladies, Guyon, but simply for myself that I wish to go along."

"I know you would like to see your family but . . ."

"That's true, but mainly I don't want to be apart from you." A small hand stroked down his chest as she nestled closer. "Oh, Guyon, it was so horrible when you were ill. I was so frightened, thinking that there might never be a chance for us to be together again." Seemingly of its own volition, her hand continued its feather-light caress, coming temptingly close to the seat of his desire. "Please take me with you," she murmured against his throat. "I won't get

in the way, and we'll certainly find some time to be together."

"I cannot!" Guyon groaned, forcibly putting her from him. "Believe me, Brenna, I would like nothing better than to have you with me. But this is not a journey you can make. Accept that and desist."

Pouting, Brenna frowned at him. He was being amazingly obstinate. She couldn't for the life of her imagine why he wouldn't take her along. Granted there were all sorts of rumors: that Edward was ill, perhaps even dying; that some disposition had to be made of the throne; that the Earl Harold was pushing hard to be named his successor. But none of that was new. Edward was an elderly man who could not reasonably be expected to live much longer. When he died, the Witan would name the next king. Fulfilling their traditional responsibility, the ancient council of wisemen would meet to consider who could best sit the throne.

This time, at least, their choice was a foregone conclusion. No other earl held anything like Harold's power, nor could any other command a fraction of his respect and loyalty. Harold would be king, England would continue to prosper and—perhaps in some small measure because of her marriage—relations between her homeland and Normandy would improve. What did all that have to do with whether or not she could accompany Guyon?

"If you go alone," she said, trying one last ploy, "we will be apart at Christmas."

"I am sorry about that," Guyon said patiently as he rose and began to dress. "But it cannot be helped. Roanna will keep you company, and I'm

sure the Lady Matilda will see that you want for nothing." Smiling down at his wife, her nude body still glowing from his lovemaking, he added, "Except, of course, for that which only I have the right to give you." Laughing at her chagrin, Guyon stooped to kiss her. He left the room hastily, wearing a very male grin of contentment.

"I can't make him listen to reason," Brenna complained a short while later as she sat in the solar with her sister-in-law. "I tried and tried, but he won't agree to take me along."

Roanna smiled mischievously. She could well imagine what form such persuasion had taken. It was a wonder her brother was still on his feet. Of course, he had looked remarkably fit as he strode through the Great Hall to meet with the Duke. Roanna's smile faded. There had been so many meetings in the last few days, so much coming and going of messengers and knights. One heard so many strange things.

"It's probably best that you don't go," she ventured carefully. "After all, the weather is bad and . . ."

"I'm hardly afraid of a little cold and snow," Brenna insisted. In fact, the winter was unusually mild so far. With only a few weeks to go to Christmas, the court still lacked even the hint of a festive air. She sighed, thinking of past years at Winchester when the great hall was decorated with evergreen boughs, mistletoe hung from the rafters, and excitement built early for the holiday feast that went on for days. Edward's court was hardly as gay as Winchester, but just then it seemed like a decided improve-

ment on the dour preoccupation of Falaise. Perhaps it would be good to be home for a while.

"I'm sure Guyon will try not to be gone long. And this time, he's taking a large company of knights, so you need not fear for him." Roanna touched her sister-in-law's hand soothingly. "Perhaps when he comes back, we will be able to go on to Montfort. You must be anxious to see your new home."

Brenna nodded absently, her mind still on what Roanna had said earlier. "He's taking a large company of knights? Will they be leaving from Honfleur?"

"I suppose so." Roanna thought for a moment, then said more firmly, "In fact, I know they will be. They're going to escort that merchant train that's passing through here. I overheard several of the traders talking about it. They had planned to stay several more days, but now they're going to leave tomorrow to take advantage of Guyon's protection."

Glancing unenthusiastically at her needlework, Roanna said, "All those wagons full of silk and spices must be a great temptation to thieves."

All those wagons, Brenna was thinking, must provide many places to hide. She smiled secretly. No longer so foolish as to go off on her own, she believed she just might have found a way around Guyon's stubborn refusal to take her along.

Roanna looked up sharply. She knew her sister-in-law well enough to be alert to the sudden shift in her mood. The anticipatory gleam in those eyes that a moment before had held only disappointment worried her. "Brenna, you're not thinking of . . ."

"While Guyon's away," the younger girl said hastily, "something really must be done about my

wardrobe. There wasn't time when he was ill, but now I'm counting on your help."

The implicit suggestion that she was thinking only of new clothes was not really deception, Brenna told herself. After all, with all her measurements already taken, and both fabrics and colors selected, she didn't really have to be present for the final assembling of her wardrobe. Roanna's relieved smile made her feel guilty, but she fought back the flush that threatened to give her away. Picking up her needlework, Brenna began to think about just how she might be able to insert herself into one of the baggage wagons.

In the end, it proved easier than she had expected. The only truly difficult part was selecting the right moment. There was not very much time between her farewell to Guyon on the steps of the keep and the departure of the train. But her small bundle of clothing and provisions was already hidden in the wagon she selected during an early morning sortie while Guyon was at the stables. Once he and his knights were mounted and moving toward the gatehouse, it took barely an instant to drop behind the other ladies, scamper across the bailey, and wiggle her way under the piles of fabric that effectively hid her from view.

The journey, once her initial excitement died away, was dreadfully uncomfortable. Used to riding, Brenna had never before experienced the incessant jostling of an unpadded wagon passing over rutted roads. Long before they stopped for the night, she was covered with bruises and barely able to suppress her moans. Forced to wait until everyone else had eaten and bedded down for the night, Brenna at last

managed to crawl from the wagon. She found a stream some little distance away where she bathed her face and quenched her thirst. Thinking longingly of a hot soak that would ease her cramped muscles, she went hastily back to the wagon. Wrapped in the gray-green velvet cloak that had been a present from Edythe and snuggled down among the bundles, she slept fitfully through the night. By this time, Roanna must certainly have noted her absence. It was quite possible that at any moment, riders would arrive from the Duke to inform Guyon of his errant wife's presence. How humiliating it would be to be dragged out of the wagon and forced to confront his anger.

As the hours passed, and no one came, Brenna rested a little easier. She had counted on Roanna's own adventurous streak to accept what was done and say nothing of it. As the train moved on the following morning, she began to think her plan just might work.

Honfleur was a small, crowded town as chaotic and dirty as any port. Because of the unusually mild winter, the wharves were as crowded as they had been several months before when Brenna and Guyon arrived from England. There was nothing at all distinctive about the place, but because it had been her first sight of Normandy, Honfleur remained sharp in her memory. Although the light was already fading when Guyon and his men said their farewells to the grateful merchants, Brenna had no difficulty finding her way through the winding streets to the docks. Keeping her head down, her hair covered by a hood, she stayed just behind her lord's party. Brenna was taking no chances that some drunken sailor or lustful townsman would decide to amuse

himself with her. Should she need help, it would at least be within earshot.

When she reached the wharves without incident, she relaxed momentarily, but still watched carefully to see which ship Guyon was taking. Hidden by bales of wool, she waited as the men dismounted and carefully led their horses onto the largest of the single-masted longboats riding at anchor. With the animals secured, several of the knights took themselves off to find amusement in the town. Brenna caught his words as Guyon cheerfully admonished them to be back before dawn since they would sail on the tide. She was pleased to see that he did not go with them, but instead joined his squire in a simple meal eaten on deck before stretching out to sleep beneath the stars.

When it was quiet all along the wharf, the only sounds coming from the nearby taverns and brothels, Brenna slipped through the shadows to the boat. Blessing the concealment offered by equipment and supplies piled up in the bow, she quickly hid herself.

Brenna was still asleep at dawn when the shouts of the men raising the anchor woke her. The day was fair, with a good breeze from the south. Peering out, she saw Guyon and his knights taking their turn at the oars which would carry them far enough out of the bay to raise the square sail. Once the canvas filled out in the wind, there was little else to do but steer by the large oar held by a loop of rope to the right side of the boat. With one man so occupied, and the usual lookout automatically posted at the bow, the rest of Guyon's party sprawled out on the rowing benches.

The men were in good humor. They laughed and

joked among themselves, their often ribald stories making Brenna blush. She had never before been in the company of men who did not know a lady was present. It was a revelation to her to realize how much these vigorous, intensely virile warriors tempered their behavior so as not to shock or offend.

Guyon's young squire, in particular, came in for more than his share of kidding. Still a beardless youth, he was the self-conscious recipient of the knights' good-natured suggestions regarding his future with the fair sex. Before very long, it was decided to get the young man bedded while they were all in England.

One of the burly, battle-scarred men began to declaim on the sensuality of English women, only to break off abruptly. Guyon's scowl had reminded him that his lord possessed an English wife. Reddening, the man sat down quickly. For all their master's willingness to relax with them, it did not do to forget he would tolerate not the slightest untoward comment about his lady. The men glanced at each other warily, knowing he was missing her already.

Leaning back against the bench, Guyon sighed. He wished there could have been some way to bring Brenna with him. But the journey was too dangerous, and its implications too serious to allow for any distraction. Regretfully, he wondered how long it would be before he held her again. Having been so briefly reunited following his illness, he was not at all pleased by the prospect of several more weeks of celibacy. Nor could he think kindly of the seemingly casual way Brenna had parted from him. After all her pleas to be taken along, he had expected a more emotional farewell.

Shading his eyes against the sun, Guyon glanced absently toward the bow. He had personally checked all the men's equipment when it was stowed and knew it to be in good order. But something about the way it looked just then caught his attention. He straightened slightly as a flash of grayish-green flitted between the piles of shields, blankets, and saddles.

Perhaps he imagined it, he thought when several moments of careful scrutiny revealed nothing untoward. Lulled by the smooth motion of the longboat, he was half-dozing when the same vivid color rippled again in the corner of his vision. As he watched, eyes widening, the fabric was pulled hastily back by a delicate, white hand.

A harsh scowl distorted Guyon's features. His men looked up in surprise when he rose abruptly and strode toward the bow. His large, powerful hand shot out to pull aside the concealment even as his fierce expression made it clear he was already certain what he would find.

Chapter Thirteen

"I SHOULD MAKE YOU ROW THE REST OF THE WAY!" Guyon snarled.

Startled by his enraged stare, Brenna hung her head. A small foot trailed self-consciously across the wooden deck. She had expected him to be angry, but not this angry. "I'm sorry, Guyon. It's just that I didn't want to be away from you and there seemed no reason . . ."

"So you took it on yourself to come along," he interrupted furiously. A dark flush stained the high arc of his cheekbones. "God's blood, you are the most infuriating woman! Have you no sense at all? I said you could not come. I bade you remain at Falaise. I went off expecting some modicum of obedience from you, as, Lord knows, is my right. But no! You have to show yourself willful and impulsive and blindingly foolish! Yet again!"

Under his tirade, Brenna paled. Painfully aware of the nearness of his men, who were staring at her in astonished disbelief, she couldn't blame Guyon for feeling embarrassed. No man liked to be thought incapable of controlling his own wife. Yet surely the whole matter was being taken much too seriously.

About to say something to that effect, she was forestalled when Guyon demanded, "I suppose my idiot sister knows about this?"

"I didn't confide in her," Brenna shot back, annoyed that he should seek to blame Roanna. "When she realized I was gone, she must have thought it would be better to keep silent than risk creating a scene."

"So she does have some sense. Far more than you, at least." Eyes glittering dangerously, he rasped, "Did you give any thought at all to the consequences of what you were doing? Did you for even a moment consider that I had ample reasons for leaving you behind?"

"No, I didn't think you had reasons!" Brenna exclaimed, choosing to ignore his first question. Rather than admit she had behaved impulsively, she chose to take refuge in righteous indignation. "You left me without any explanation, expecting me simply to accept your will. I will not stand for that. I have a mind of my own which I am perfectly capable of using. I won't be treated like some . . . some whore to be taken or ignored as you wish!"

Guyon's fist clenched white at his sides. A pulse throbbed amid the golden stubble on his cheek. The immense effort to hold himself in check and not to do her some harm made him tremble. Through lips drawn tight in rage, he hissed, "Don't you ever again

suggest I think of you as less than my wife. Never have I treated you with less than respect and love, which I can only think now has been a mistake!" Seizing her by the wrist in a grip so painful that Brenna yelped, he hauled her toward midships where his men, after hastily removing themselves from the scene of their lord and lady's dispute, were busy erecting a small tent. The moment it was in place, Guyon shoved her inside.

"You will stay here until I decide what to do with you. Be warned, Brenna. Don't let me see or hear you until my temper has cooled or I will not be responsible for what I do!"

Gulping, Brenna subsided on the hard floor inside the tent. Never had she seen Guyon in such a fury. Even when she fled from Thorney in that misguided effort to prevent their marriage, he had shown more control. She needed no convincing that he was on the edge of violence. Frightened tears slipped down her ashen cheeks as she wondered why her simple desire to be with him enraged him so.

No answer was forthcoming as Brenna spent a miserable day inside the tent. Guyon did not come near her, but around midmorning one of his knights did reach inside to deposit a jug of water and a bowl of food. He said nothing, nor did he look at her. She was clearly in profound disfavor.

A little while later, after Brenna gingerly ate some small portion of the meal, the knight returned. He took the dish away, left the water, and added a blanket which she welcomed gratefully. The wind was picking up. Even inside the tent, it was becoming bitingly cold. Shivering, Brenna wrapped the blanket around her. The soreness caused by jostling

in the wagon increased as the hardwood planks beneath her rose and fell. Try though she did, it was impossible to get comfortable. At last she gave up. Standing, she looked longingly out between a crack in the canvas.

Guyon was sitting at the oar. Hoodless, his hair glistened in the pale sun. Wearing chain mail under his cloak, he looked even more massive than usual. The hard, angular bones of his face stood out in high relief, but his expression was masked. Even as he automatically guided the longboat, his thoughts were clearly elsewhere.

The knight who had come to Brenna's tent approached him gingerly. They exchanged a few words. Guyon hesitated for just a moment before nodding. The knight went away, only to return shortly with a mug of warmed mead. He handed it through the tent flap silently.

Brenna smiled hesitantly, breathing in the fragrance of spices and honey. "Thank you."

The knight sensibly refused to meet her eyes. Even windblown and half-frozen as she must be, he had never seen a more beautiful woman. No wonder their lord had so rushed her into marriage, and no wonder he would not take kindly to any man looking at her too closely. "Do well to stay under the blanket, my lady." He advised her gruffly, withdrawing from the tent.

Brenna sipped the mead slowly. It drove some of the chill from her body but did nothing to ease the cold grip of dread inside her. Through the long hours of the afternoon, she had plenty of time to consider why Guyon might have been so intent on her staying at Falaise. During his illness, she had managed to

block out the likelihood that his attackers were English. But now she had to give real consideration to that possibility. If her suspicions were correct, he was going into a very dangerous situation. No wonder he hadn't wanted her along.

Glad that her stomach at least was at peace, Brenna settled down to consider why anyone in her homeland might wish to harm her husband. She was no closer to deciding that when a shout from the bow alerted her to the nearness of land. Easing aside the canvas flap, she gazed out at a secluded stretch of the English coastland barely visible in the gathering dusk. There was no town in sight, much less a port. As the longboat drew closer to shore, she could make out a small band of men on horseback, apparently waiting for them. Brenna's surprise deepened as she realized all the men were Norman, most likely some of those who used King Edward's fondness for their land to secure positions at Thorney. Their presence was deeply resented and carefully watched by all the English lords, most particularly Lord Harold, who made no secret of intending to dispose of them as soon as he took the throne.

The absence of any native lords among the entourage, as well as the landing on such a deserted beach, alarmed Brenna greatly. Both seemed to indicate that Guyon was entering England secretly, in clear breach of all protocol. His manner, when he at last came to collect her, strengthened that belief.

"Come on," he ordered brusquely. "We have to get moving."

Brenna kept sensibly silent as she followed him from the longboat. The knights were already mounted. Ignoring the startled glances of the reception

committee, she waited as Guyon slid smoothly onto his palfrey. He reached down a hand to her. "There is no horse for you. You will ride with me."

Nodding wordlessly, Brenna was lifted onto the steed's broad back. Held securely against the iron width of his chest, with his mail-sheathed arm tight around her waist, Brenna had to fight to retain her composure. If only he would talk to her, express some willingness to forgive her impulsiveness. But Guyon remained stubbornly withdrawn as the miles passed and Brenna grew more and more weary. At last, when the combination of cold, dread, and exhaustion could no longer be denied, she slumped against him. Thick black lashes closed over her troubled eyes. A little sigh escaped her as she instinctively nestled deeper into his arms.

Guyon watched her warily. Only when he was certain she was asleep did his expression soften. The futility of trying to stay angry at her hit him hard. Much as he wanted to, he could feel nothing but worry about how he would keep her safe, and even some niggling gladness that she was with him. Courage she had aplenty. If only she might learn to temper it with a little caution. Smiling ruefully, he enveloped her in the folds of his own cloak. A soft sound of contentment reached him as she drifted into even deeper sleep.

When Brenna awoke, it was night. The knights and their escort were camped in a small grove of winter-bare trees. A meager fire burned, surrounded by a wall of shields to mask it from any curious eyes that might happen to be hidden on the nearby hills. The men were talking together in low tones she could not catch. Stretching gingerly, she bit back a

moan of protest. There seemed to not be a single part of her body that didn't ache. She sat up slowly, instinctively cautious of the great looming shapes of men in helmets and armor. Though they clearly intended to stay there through the night, Guyon was not letting his men relax. Guards were posted, weapons were within easy reach, and an atmosphere of watchfulness permeated the campsite.

Brenna's movement, tentative though it was, brought quick attention. She glanced up, finding her husband towering above her. "Are you all right?" he demanded tersely.

Sore in every muscle and joint, she was anything but. Not for any torture, though, would Brenna admit as much. Defiantly, she insisted, "I'm fine."

A reluctant smile flitted across Guyon's hard features. Unwarranted burden though she was, he had to admire her fortitude. "Have something to eat," he said more gently. "We will rest for only a few hours before moving on."

Brenna did as he wished. Sleep had only partially restored her mind and body. She knew she would need all the energy she could muster to keep up with the battle-hardened, tense-faced men around her. Chewing the dried beef, she was unaware of Guyon watching her. The shadows under her eyes and the frailness about her shoulders concerned him. His mission was such that he could not stand any delay, no matter the reason. Sighing, he steeled himself for what must be.

Brenna remembered very little of the next few hours. She knew she dozed briefly, only to be awakened too soon as they once again set off. Mile after mile passed in a weary blur. They stopped

briefly the following morning, long enough to see to personal needs and water the horses. Brenna's exhausted body protested as she was lifted back into the saddle. Without the added protection of cotton padding and chain mail, she felt the cold far more keenly than the men. Even Guyon's nearness did not warm her, separated as they were by a layer of metal. Added to her physical discomfort was acute awareness of how out of place she was among the band of warriors on a mission where no woman was welcome. Her husband spoke to her rarely and then only to give instructions. The other men ignored her altogether.

The second night since their landing was spent at an abbey run by a Norman-born prelate. Glad though she was for the shelter, Brenna could not help but notice the cautious eagerness of their welcome. The monks seemed at once greatly excited and fearful. Every move the small group made was avidly if surreptitiously watched. The abbot himself, after recovering from his shock at Brenna's presence, unbent enough to see to her comfort. Confined to the small guest house, the furthest within the abbey's precincts that any female could go, she was brought food, blankets, and warm water.

Left alone in the small, bare room, Brenna scrubbed her hands and face before eating as much of the frugal meal as she could manage. Curled up on the hard palette, she let down her plaited hair and brushed it vigorously. When the ebony mass hung in a gleaming cloud to her waist, she wrapped herself in the blankets and lay back wearily. Sleep came more readily than she would have thought possible, but proved fitful. Scattered images of mail-clad warriors,

clashing swords, and a pervasive sense of approaching danger kept her from true rest.

When Guyon at last came to join her, having dined with the other men in the refectory, she was awake. The candle he carried shone on her white, strained face. Lying down beside her, Guyon observed her for some time in silence. He was still trying hard to be angry, and to impress on her through hardship the foolishness of her actions. But he could not bear to see her so distressed, especially when he knew far worse was to come. Sighing, his arms reached out to gather her close.

Long minutes passed before he spoke. When he did his voice was low and tinged with something very like regret. "We will reach London tomorrow."

Brenna said nothing, waiting for him to continue. In the hours before they reached the abbey, she had begun to recognize the countryside they passed through. Realizing that the capital was their likely destination, it was not difficult to determine how close they were. Guyon merely confirmed what she already suspected. But what he said next did surprise her.

"Edward knows we are coming, although not exactly when."

"Then why all the secrecy?" Brenna asked. "If the King approves your presence, why didn't you sail straight to London to be received by him?"

"Because," Guyon explained grimly, "powerful forces at the court oppose our being here. It's quite possible that had the time and place of our arrival been known, we would have been slain before ever getting near the King."

Brenna did not have to ask who her husband

suspected of engineering such a plot. Only one man in England had the power and audacity to attempt such a subversion of royal will. But she could not believe the Earl Harold capable of such an action. Though he fought fiercely and with great success when he had to, he was far too subtle and wily to risk the scandal that would naturally result from murdering emissaries the King wished to receive. Harold had lived all his life under the stigma of his father's crime against Edward's brother. Of all men, he would surely wish to avoid any slur to his name. The stakes would have to be great indeed for the Earl to do what Guyon suggested.

But when she tried to convince her husband of this, he brushed aside her arguments with a single statement she could not refute. "Edward is dying. If my latest information is correct, he can't have more than a few weeks to live."

Shocked into temporary silence, Brenna thought swiftly of what this would mean. Edward had been king some twenty-three years. Most of his subjects, including Brenna, could remember no other ruler. Granted, his intense religious devotion removed him too much from ordinary people to make him greatly loved. But neither did he inspire hatred. Thanks in large part to the careful control of the Godwinsons, Edward's rule was generally benevolent.

The knowledge that he would die soon, therefore, caused some sorrow. But hard on it came the comforting assurance that the Earl Harold would succeed to the throne he already held in all but name. With his kingship essentially guaranteed, it seemed even more inconceivable that Harold would do anything rash. Other English lords, however,

might not be so circumspect. Remembering the great resentment of the Normans who clustered so profitably around Edward, Brenna wondered if the attack on Guyon might have come from those who feared his recent bond of kinship to the Earl would give him influence with Harold after he took the throne. Perhaps the Duke had also considered that bond and sent Guyon to England to safeguard the interests of his countrymen.

"I think I understand now why you are here," Brenna said slowly, "and why you did not wish to bring me. But I cannot help but believe you exaggerate the danger. When Harold takes the throne, he will certainly want good relations with Normandy."

Guyon did not comment. His arms tightened around her. Silently, he fought against the desire to explain to Brenna exactly how she had misread the situation. But he could not. Certain though he was of her love, he was not yet willing to put it to the ultimate test. No one, least of all a young and lovely woman, should be asked to chose between homeland and husband. Yet Brenna might all too soon be confronted with just such a choice. The possible outcome filled him with dread.

Brenna sensed the tautness in him but had no idea of its cause. Gently, she said, "Perhaps when we reach Thorney I should speak with Edythe. She could arrange a private meeting between you and the Earl. I'm sure if you only had the chance to speak alone, without interference, you could reach some understanding."

Guyon smiled into the darkness. How he wished his mission could be handled so easily. But there was no possibility of a meeting, private or otherwise,

between himself and the Earl. The gulf between them was unbreachable and had been ever since that night months before when death had reached out across the miles to brush Guyon far too closely. Unwilling to mention any of this, he said only, "Your sister may not be at court. It's possible she remains in Winchester."

"But why?" Brenna asked anxiously. "Is she ill?" The Earl and his lady were never willingly apart. Separations when he went on campaign were inevitable, but Edythe always accompanied him to court. If she was still at Winchester, something was very wrong.

"No, she isn't ill," Guyon assured her hastily. "At least not that I know of. But with all that's going on, Harold may have thought it better for her to stay at home."

Sure that her husband was simply mistaken, Brenna laughed softly. "If the Earl did think so," she teased, "I doubt he had any more success than you. My sister and I may not look alike, but we share the same temperment. Edythe will be at court."

The grin Guyon flashed her reassured Brenna that he was at least beginning to forgive her transgression. Secure in that knowledge, she was at last able to sleep. Morning found her greatly refreshed and anxious to be back on the road.

Her eagerness was not matched by Guyon or his men, all of whom grew increasingly wary as they entered the capital and approached the royal keep. Their progress was watched by a subdued citizenry lacking the usual boisterousness Brenna associated with London. Winter had stripped away more than warm breezes and lush foliage. The Thames was

awash with gray and the faces of the guards who admitted them to Thorney were no more welcoming.

Even Edythe, who just as Brenna predicted had not remained at Winchester, appeared strained. Her astonishment at seeing her sister was so great that for some time she could say little. Only when Guyon went off to pay his respects to the King did Edythe at last draw the younger girl aside.

"What are you doing here?" she demanded urgently. "How could Guyon have been so foolish as to bring you?"

"He didn't exactly bring me," Brenna explained. Puzzling over the shadows beneath her sister's eyes and the nervousness so alien to her nature, she gave a deliberately light-hearted account of her journey. Rewarded by a reluctant smile, Brenna concluded, "So apparently the Duke wants Guyon to help smooth relations with the new sovereign. Once the Earl is crowned . . ."

"Did Guyon tell you this?" Edythe interrupted. She dropped her examination of Brenna's travel-stained cloak to stare at her intently.

"Not exactly," the younger girl admitted. "At first he was so angry at finding me on the boat that he would hardly say anything at all. Since then we've talked a little, but not much. Guyon seems to have some strange idea that . . ." She broke off momentarily, frowning. "You see, he was badly hurt a few months ago. Some men attacked him on a road near the Normandy coast. He . . . he almost d-died. If he had, I think I would have too. Oh, Edythe, it was so terrible!" Her voice broke, tears of remembered horror glistening in her gray-green eyes.

Edythe hesitated only a moment before dropping

the cloak and embracing her sister. She held her gently, letting Brenna cry herself out. When at last the storm of emotion—made all the more intense by the last few difficult days—had passed, Brenna managed a watery smile.

"Only the healing skills you taught me saved him, Edythe," she said gratefully.

"I am glad," her sister murmured sincerely. She dreaded the thought of Guyon's death, although she accepted it as a price that might have to be paid. There would be other costs to Harold's kingship, striking her even more personally, that she could not bear to think about. Gently, she said, "You must be exhausted. Why don't you have something to eat and then rest for a bit?" When Brenna hesitated, Edythe added, "Nothing will happen for quite a while yet."

That certainly proved to be true, Brenna reflected ruefully several weeks later as she stared out a window of the women's solar at the newly fallen snow. At what should have been the most joyful time of the year, Thorney lay as hushed and still as the aged man gasping out his last breaths in the royal bedchamber. Defying all predictions of his physicians, priests, and eager lords, Edward still lingered. He was not having an easy death. For a man who had lived so reluctantly in the world of the flesh, his spirit was oddly hesitant about departing.

Brenna shivered as she considered the scene in the room above her head. Edward lay on his hard bed of boards and sacking, his white beard combed over his shallow chest and his thin hands folded in an attitude of prayer. His wife knelt almost constantly at his

side. The Queen could only be coaxed away for the briefest periods to eat and sleep. She was not the only member of the court keeping vigil. Earl Harold was rarely absent from the royal chamber. When he did have to be away, one or more of his trusted brothers took his place. They did not speak to or in any way acknowledge Guyon, who also rarely left Edward's presence. Several Norman knights always attended him, as others kept careful watch over Brenna.

The constant scrutiny of her husband's men prompted her to complain. But on that point Guyon was adamant. "I will not leave you unprotected," he insisted, "and do not let me hear of you attempting to evade your guard. They are there only to protect you."

Brenna did not ask from what she might need protection. With all the rumors and tensions swirling around Thorney, Guyon could have cited a dozen dangers. Chief among them was the barely credible but nonetheless repeated assertion that King Edward meant to name his own successor in contradiction of ancient law and the power of the Witan. Worse yet, there were even some who whispered that successor would not be the Earl Harold, surely the only man capable of uniting the country and preserving the peace.

Considering the foolishness of such a gesture, Brenna shook her head. Edward had always been capable of childish stubbornness, but surely not even he would show such utter disregard for the well-being of his people. Not that it would do him any good if he tried. Harold would waste no time rallying

the other lords to his cause. With Edward's approval or without it, he would be the next king. Brenna could only hope his succession would go smoothly. Should he encounter difficulty, the Earl might well be forced into a move that would shatter all her sister's happiness.

Gazing fondly at Edythe, Brenna fought down her fear that they would soon be separated. She and her sister had grown even closer over the last few weeks. Despite the profound differences between the men they loved, their affection for one another was stronger than ever. In a court shorn of even a hint of gaiety, Edythe and Brenna spent almost every waking hour together. They sewed, chatted, and sometimes just sat silently drawing strength from each other. At first their conversation had been stilted, because there was so much they couldn't say without betraying the trust of their lords. But after the first few days their unease wore off and they found many subjects to pass the time.

The only break in the wearisome routine came some three days after Christmas when the just-completed Westminster Abbey was consecrated. How sad, Brenna thought, that after all the years of waiting and planning, Edward could not see the fruition of his dream. Even as the prayers were chanted and the incense burned, the King lay paralyzed and barely conscious. He showed no sign of understanding when the Queen, returning from the ceremonies, recounted them to him. Nor did he speak again after making his final confession on the last day of the year.

"They say his voice is gone," Edythe murmured

suddenly, looking up from her needlework. "Pray God it is true."

"Pray God he is taken soon," Brenna amended, still thinking of the shrunken, tormented shell Edward had become.

Two days later her prayer was answered.

Chapter Fourteen

"My lord," a low voice called from just beyond the sleeping chamber's door, "it is time."

Guyon was instantly awake. He sat up, automatically reaching for the longsword set beside the bed before remembering his own man waited just outside. Dressing hurriedly, he was fully clothed and ready to go before he realized Brenna was also awake.

"It's the King, isn't it?" she murmured, huddled under the mass of down-filled covers that failed to warm her.

Guyon nodded. "Go back to sleep. I will send word when there is any news."

His tone was gruff, but Brenna took no umbrage at it. She knew he was exhausted and deeply worried. Gritting her teeth against the icy air waiting

just beyond the bed, she rose determinedly. "I would come with you."

Guyon hesitated. With the crisis now fast approaching its peak, he wanted very much to keep her close. When the end came, minutes might count dearly and in the twisting labyrinth of the court he might not be able to get to her quickly enough. Still, he was loath to take her into what promised to be a frightening, desperate scene.

Seeing his indecision, Brenna threw on her clothes. She gave him little time to consider before marching to the door and flinging it open. "Why do you tarry, my lord? The summons sounded urgent."

The sight of her slender, delicate form poised so obstinately, back straight and eyes flashing, as though she dared him to again make the mistake of trying to leave her behind wrung a rueful grin from Guyon. "Lead on, my lady. For a change, I will follow you."

Smiling at his acceptance, Brenna slipped her small hand in his. "We will go together, love," she said softly, "for that is how I would have us always be."

For a moment, Guyon stared down at the glossy wealth of midnight hair still tangled from her restless sleep. He breathed deeply of her light perfume, fighting down the urge to draw her to him and bury himself against her scented skin. Did her words mean what they seemed? Though they had talked little of the repercussions that would follow the King's death, Guyon guessed his wife understood a great deal. For all her gentle beauty and youth, her mind was sharp and her perceptions keen. In the

weeks at Thorney, she would surely have sifted through the rumors swirling about the court. However unpleasant her conclusions must be, he knew she had the courage to face them squarely.

Loving her as he did, he could only hope that her insistence on accompanying him meant she suspected what was to come. When her hand trembled slightly in his, he was even more convinced that her words were as serious and far-reaching as he prayed.

The royal chamber was crowded. Tall white candles set at the four corners of the bed cast an eerie glow over the men and women gathered there. Stigand, Archbishop of Canterbury, knelt beside the dying king. The prelate was a loyal supporter of the Godwinsons who during his youth had fought beside the old Earl in his ascent to power. Stigand's holy office was the reward for his support. Edward despised him. As the Archbishop murmured prayers, the King kept his face resolutely averted.

In the last hours of his life, Edward had recovered much of the aura of sanctified dignity which had always surrounded him. Now that the battle was essentially over, his slight body looked relaxed and at ease. Twin spots of red were the only color in a face as pale as milk. His hair and beard were neatly combed. The neck and arms of a soft unbleached robe were visible above the covers, against which his hands rested quietly. Edward's eyes were closed but a slight smile touched his thin lips, perhaps in response to the low sobs of his Queen kneeling at the foot of the bed.

It could not be doubted that the Lady Edith regretted her lord's swiftly approaching death, al-

though no one could say for sure how much of her grief was for him and how much was for the dangers her family might soon face. If any other member of the Godwinson clan shared her distress, there was no sign of it. Just behind his sister, grim-faced and silent, stood the Earl Harold. On either side of him stood his most trusted brothers, the Earls Leofwine and Gyrth. Nearby, although not so close as to be inextricably linked to the Godwinsons, other of England's nobles waited. Brenna recognized many of them, but it was her powerful kinsman who held her attention. Harold glanced up as she and Guyon entered the room. He said nothing, but his gray eyes flashed angrily.

Taking Brenna by the arm, Guyon went to join the other Normans already in the room. They were an uneasy-looking group. Despite the King's presence, no man was unarmed nor was there any pretense of reliance on dress swords. The weapons were strictly battle quality, and few men let their hands drift from the hilts for more than an instant. The English were similarly armed, their scowls making it clear they would just as soon dispense with those they considered foreign interlopers. But so long as Edward lived, the men he had always preferred to have around him would remain.

An hour passed with grudging slowness. The cloying smell of incense made Brenna's head throb. She swayed slightly as Guyon's grip tightened. He looked down at her with concern. She managed a small smile, which faded abruptly as a sound came from the bed.

Edward stirred restlessly, his blue-veined hands

clenching. A low moan escaped him as everyone in the room tensed. Slowly, excruciatingly, the man many had hoped was now mute began to speak.

"W-woe . . . over all . . . blood and grief . . . my poor land . . . payment of sins . . ." Edward gasped painfully. His eyes shot open, yellowed by illness yet still compelling. "I can see it . . . coming . . . death . . . so much . . . Fire and sword until God's will is done . . . There will be an omen . . . in the s-sky . . ."

"Pay no attention to him," Stigand snapped. "The ramblings of a dying fool mean nothing."

Brenna gasped at the cruelty of such a remark but few others in the room made even a pretense of surprise. They all knew that Edward's hatred for the Godwinsons and their supporters was more than amply returned. Still no one was prepared to take the Archbishop's advice. There was a collective indrawing of breath as Edward continued.

"Must try . . . stop it . . . Do right . . . England's next king . . ." As one, Norman and English alike leaned forward intently. The air above the King's bed became filled with straining heads eager not to miss a syllable. ". . . must keep God's peace . . . not bring war. W-William . . . good man . . . strong . . . keep the peace."

A dark flush suffused the Earl Harold's rugged face. Brenna watched in unwilling fascination as her kinsman's hard, callused hand tightened on the short sword he wore. For a terrible moment she thought he meant to silence the ranting King.

With a tremendous effort of will, Harold refrained from any action. He stood stone-still, listening as Edward drew upon the last of his strength. The

yellow eyes looked directly at him before moving slowly to Guyon. "William . . . William must be King." A pale, blue-veined hand reached out shakily. "Tell them . . . my will . . . William is my heir . . . t-tell t-themmmm . . ."

Guyon took a quick step toward the bed, his path instinctively cleared by the stern-faced Normans. The King's trembling hand was clasped warmly in his. Very quietly, he said, "It shall be as you will, my lord."

Edward stared at him a moment longer before slowly nodding. A low sigh escaped him. His eyes closed. Beneath the covers, his narrow chest rose . . . fell . . . and was still.

For all that the death was expected, it took some seconds for everyone to realize it had at last occurred. In that time, Guyon moved. He dropped the King's hand, his own going unerringly to his sword, which he drew without hesitation. Catching the glint of steel, Brenna gasped. Around her, the other Normans had also drawn their weapons. Several moved toward the door, assuring that their departure could not be stopped. Through the open passage, Brenna could see other Normans, with swords drawn, lining the corridor. Such a concerted action could only have been planned well in advance. There was no doubt as to who was responsible.

Guyon smiled humorlessly as he confronted the Earl. "You will understand, I am sure, that we prefer to leave now."

Despite what must have been immense rage at having been so caught out, Harold spoke softly. "You may certainly try." His hand moved in a silent signal to his men, restraining them from attempting

to fight in the small, crowded room where they could be quickly outnumbered and slain. The English stirred restively, but for once obeyed.

Guyon's smile deepened. "Follow us if you will, but I should tell you the stables have been fired. Your horses were set loose and will need rounding up before you go anywhere."

Harold stiffened, appreciating for the first time just how thoroughly Guyon had planned. As her husband backed toward the door, Brenna instinctively moved with him. The Earl's gaze fell on her.

"Leave the girl. She will come to no harm. But if she goes with you, I cannot guarantee her safety when you are caught."

There was no mistaking the genuineness of his concern, nor could Guyon doubt the Earl's pledge of safety. Reluctantly, he halted. His stomach clenched as he gazed at his wife. Much as he dreaded it, she had to be given a clear-cut choice. Gently, he murmured, "Brenna . . . ?"

There was no hesitation in the firm step that took her to him. Her expression was calm and her voice steady as Brenna said, "I have already told you once, my lord. We will go together."

Guyon dared not relax but he did allow himself a warm smile. One hand in hers, the other grasping his sword, he moved quickly from the room. Surrounded by the other Normans who formed a phalanx back and front to discourage any hot-headed Englishman foolish enough to attempt to follow, they hurried down the corridor. Brenna's breath caught in her throat as they passed the bodies of several English guards dispatched while the King lay dying. Despite the choice she had not hesitated to make,

she had an instinctive urge to try to aid those she still thought of as her countrymen. Only Guyon's firm grip stopped her. As they hurried from the stone keep, the stench of burning wood assailed them. That and the frantic shouts from the stables confirmed what Guyon had told the Earl. Harold's horses were scattered panic-stricken through the town, but their own mounts waited saddled and ready at the foot of the staircase.

Tossed onto her saddle, Brenna held on for dear life as the party galloped across the bailey and over the lowered drawbridge. She had barely an instant to register the bodies lying beneath the portcullis before that sorrowful sight vanished behind her. Oblivious to the January cold whipping at her slender body, Brenna concentrated on keeping pace with her husband and his men. She rode beside Guyon, who kept a careful eye on her to make sure she was in no difficulty. Her horse was large and powerful, as well as superbly trained. She had only to keep a firm grip on the reins and let him do the rest.

Brenna had expected them to turn south toward the river road that skirted London and led eventually to the coast. But Guyon surprised her. At the first crossroads, he headed west.

"W-why?" Brenna managed to gasp, though she doubted he could hear her above the pounding hooves and wind.

Drawing closer to him, she repeated the question. This time Guyon heard. "Because Harold will expect us to go south. He'll follow in that direction, and send outriders to close the ports. Meanwhile, we'll lie low until we can reach the coast safely."

Brenna nodded to show she understood, but did

not speak again. Their headlong flight through the pitch-black darkness required all her attention. As during their arduous journey to London, Guyon maintained a gruelling pace. But now they traveled only at night, making camp deep in the woods during the day or taking shelter in Norman-controlled households or abbeys. Every precaution was taken to keep their presence a secret. Hidden rooms suddenly came into use. Servants who might be tempted to carry word of them to nearby English lords were sent away on seemingly innocent errands before they arrived.

Such evidence of advance planning astounded Brenna, even as it left her ruefully amused. Trust the men to turn an unfortunate aberration into a full-blown crisis. Edward's deathbed testament, lacking as it did the support of either law or tradition, was hardly the stuff of which history is made. Yet Guyon and Harold both acted as though the fate of kingdoms hung in the balance.

Stretching out on the narrow pallet that was her bed for the night, Brenna shook her head in exasperation. She was drifting between sleep and wakefulness when Guyon entered the small room. He lay down beside her without speaking and gathered her into his arms. Holding her close, as he had every night since their abrupt departure from Thorney, Guyon stroked his wife's silken hair gently. Beneath his touch, Brenna lay quiet. She waited until she felt the tension begin to ease from him before brushing soft fingers across the hard planes of his face. Wordlessly, even passionlessly, she offered what comfort she could. Guyon breathed deeply. His large hand cradled the back of her head. Securely

nestled in the curve of his body, Brenna was almost asleep when he murmured, "If all goes well, we will sleep tomorrow night on Norman soil."

Brenna knew they were near the coast, somewhere in the region of Hastings, but she had not guessed that Guyon intended to leave the country so soon. In light of the news just received from London, she had even hoped he might reconsider and stay to patch up his misunderstanding with Harold. Now that the Earl was King, and had been since being crowned the day after Edward's death, surely their differences could be resolved.

"I had thought," she began tentatively, "you might perhaps go back to London."

Even in the gray winter light filtering through the room's shutters, she could see his eyes widen in astonishment. "Go back to London? I would be seeking my own death."

"Your death? Oh, Guyon, I'm sure you're exaggerating! Since the Witan has already assembled and named Harold king, and he is crowned, what Edward said no longer matters. You must understand that." Propped on an elbow, Brenna gazed at her husband entreatingly. "Go back to London. Talk to Harold. Now that he is King, he will certainly want good relations with Normandy."

For a long moment Guyon did not respond. His hand caressed the length of her back absently. His expression, at first stern, slowly softened to one of deep regret. Sadly, he shook his head. "What you ask is not possible, my love. Harold could be crowned a thousand times over and it would not make any difference. Edward named Duke William as his heir. I must relay that message, just as your

kinsman must try to stop me. Between us, there can be no accord."

"B-but . . . you sound as though you think William will take this news seriously."

So softly that she could barely hear him, Guyon murmured, "Very seriously."

"Why? I know that in Normandy a ruler may name his heir as Edward did. But it is different in England. The Witan decides . . ."

"The Witan comprised strictly of Harold's supporters," Guyon interrupted. An icy edge came into his voice. "Word was sent to those members of the council Harold knew he could count on, and only to them, several days before Edward died. It was all arranged that they would be in London, that Harold would be hastily named the heir, and crowned with speed that can only be termed unseemly. God's blood, the man took the throne before Edward was even buried! He knew he had no time to waste, because William will naturally move to protect what is his."

"England!" Brenna exclaimed, refusing to believe what she was hearing. "England is not William's. William is a foreigner . . . a Norman . . . he cannot rule here."

"He can and he will," Guyon insisted. As an afterthought, he added, "It was all arranged years ago."

Brenna froze against him. Old rumors, never credited, were surfacing in her mind. "You don't mean when William came to England."

"That's exactly what I mean. Fifteen years ago, when the Godwinsons were in what unfortunately turned out to be temporary exile, the Duke visited

Edward. They were already friends, knew each other well. Edward had no doubt in his mind even then who he wanted to succeed him. Why do you think he's always kept so many Normans at court? Given them land, wealth, encouraged them to share his rule? He was simply preparing the way for William's ascent to the throne of England."

"No!" Brenna denied fiercely. "Edward must have been mad if he thought he could dictate England's future. The nobility will never stand for it."

"Many of them are loyal to Harold," Guyon agreed, "but many others have long envied the Godwinsons' power and would not mind seeing it diminished, if not destroyed. Further, when it becomes known that Edward left his throne to the Duke, all Christendom will rally in support of William. The will of a king cannot simply be ignored without destroying the very fabric of society."

"When it becomes known," Brenna repeated slowly, struggling to come to terms with what she had just learned. "You mean, when you tell William?"

"Exactly." Guyon turned on his side, gazing at her gently. "Now do you understand why Harold was determined I should not leave Thorney? If I had not seized the initiative from him, I'd be sitting right now in an English prison awaiting his pleasure."

"I don't believe you," Brenna insisted, though her voice wavered. "Harold wouldn't . . ."

"The good Earl," Guyon broke in vehemently, "has already tried once to kill me. Whose men do you think attacked me? They followed the Duke's messenger from Thorney but were unable to catch

him before he left the country with word that Edward was failing fast. Harold hoped William would not find out until it was too late, and if that meant killing me, he was quite willing to pay the price. So don't try to tell me now that he would receive me in London or that there could be any chance of an agreement between us. Unless Harold repents and swears loyalty to William, there is only one way this matter can be settled."

Brenna's throat tightened convulsively as the full import of what Guyon was saying struck her. If he was right, her kinsman had tried to murder her husband. And her husband might very soon be engaged in a war against her homeland. Conflicting loyalties tore through her as her eyes filled with tears.

Seeing her distress, Guyon relented. He regretted his harsh words. There would have been time enough to tell her the truth once they were safely back in Normandy. That was what he had intended, but her innocent suggestion that he return to London had so provoked him that he lashed out indiscriminately. His anger stemmed, he knew, in large part from the fact that she had chosen to come with him without truly understanding the significance of that choice. In doing so, she might well be considered to have turned her back on her homeland. As he listened to her heartbroken sobs, Guyon was tormented by the thought that she must bitterly regret her actions.

In fact, Brenna did not. She loved Guyon far too much to have any greater loyalty than to him. But she was horrified that his would-be murderers were sent by a member of her own family, and terrified

that the danger surrounding him would only worsen. Deep shame filled her as she wondered how much he must be regretting their marriage.

"Don't cry," he murmured, reaching out a gentle hand to draw her back into his embrace.

His tenderness made Brenna weep all the harder. She did not deserve it. In her despair, she recalled her own shortcomings with merciless exaggeration. She had fled from him without concern for his honor, falsely accused him about the Lady Elene, railed at him as shrilly as any fishwife, disobeyed his orders, and blindly misunderstood the perils confronting him. How could he bear to be anywhere near her, let alone touch her so lovingly?

"Brenna," Guyon pleaded, fearful she would do herself some injury, "it will be all right. I promise. Somehow, all this will be resolved. Don't cry, my love. I cannot bear to see you so."

As he spoke, Guyon instinctively eased her under him. His mouth trailed a line of gentle kisses down her cheeks and along the slender column of her throat before at last finding her lips. His touch was infinitely soothing. Coaxed gradually from her pit of despondency, Brenna could not help but respond. They made love with poignant tenderness made all the more acute by the danger surrounding them. Both gave of themselves to the utmost, drawing out their pleasure until neither could endure it a moment longer. Only then did Guyon release himself inside her. Brenna received him joyfully. The nearness of death, seeming to press in against the very walls of their sanctuary, made their love a reaffirmation of life itself. Lying still and content in his arms afterward, Brenna uttered a silent prayer that what they

had just shared would result in a child. Only by nurturing Guyon's seed within her would she find any protection from the fast-approaching terrors she could no longer deny.

They awoke toward dusk. Guyon stirred first, easing himself carefully from the bed. He gazed down at Brenna lovingly, but frowned when he noticed the shadows beneath her eyes. For all the eagerness of her lovemaking, he knew she was close to exhaustion. Her delicate body possessed strength which never failed to amaze him, but even it was not without limit. More determined than ever to get her safely and quickly back to Normandy, Guyon left the room in search of food.

As soon as the protective shroud of darkness settled over the frozen landscape, the small party set off once again. Guided by the full moon, they made good progress along the narrow road bordering Pevensey Bay. The ruins of an ancient fort loomed above the calm waters long valued as a natural anchorage. Crossing the high ridge to the east, they slowed their pace. The last few miles to Hastings were covered with great caution.

Drawing rein on the cliff above the sleeping port, Guyon surveyed it carefully. His arrival was well-timed. The waning moon was still bright enough to reveal any unusual security measures that might have been taken. But it would set soon enough to allow him to move unseen to where the Norman boatmen waited.

Guyon was not unfamiliar with Hastings. The previous summer, before he was so enchantingly distracted by Brenna, he paid the town a visit ostensibly to discuss trading practices but in fact to

reconnoiter the port facilities and surrounding waterways for the Duke. He knew the area as far north as Telham Hill well enough to find his way through it under the most adverse circumstances. He also had no difficulty discerning the changes that had taken place around the town.

Harold's men had clearly been busy. The new king must have lost no time sending outriders to the coast to seal all the ports. A hastily erected guardpost stood just outside the walls. Patrols were in evidence along the jetties and an English longboat rode at anchor, ready to follow and overtake anyone attempting to flee.

Very thorough, Guyon considered admiringly, but not sufficient to stop him. Unlike some, he had never made the mistake of underestimating Harold Godwinson. From the first moment the two men met, he accorded the English lord top marks for intelligence and ingenuity. In that respect, he was not unlike the Duke. Guyon knew a fleeting moment of regret that the Harold and William would never meet as friends. Who knew what two such remarkable men might have been able to accomplish acting in concert? He forced that thought down, focusing all his attention on the last hurdle between him and Normandy.

"You will stay here," he whispered to Brenna, "while we take a look ahead."

Nodding, Brenna soothed her horse who had begun to shy nervously. "You will not be gone long?"

"Not very," Guyon reassured her. "The boatmen are due to meet us at the entrance to Bulverhythe inlet. I just want to be sure the way is clear."

Guyon touched her hand gently. Leaning across their saddles, they shared a lingering kiss without concern for the watching men. She thought he hesitated a moment afterward, as though reluctant to leave her. But in the next instant he had torn himself away and was giving orders to the two knights who would remain behind. Taking the rest, he disappeared over the rise toward the shallow lagoon lying just west of Hastings.

The wind picked up. Blowing out of the north, it carried the bite of ice-locked wastelands. Brenna drew her cloak tighter around her. At least the wind came from the right direction, she thought wryly. So far Guyon's luck was holding. A contrary wind could trap them on the coast for days, perhaps even weeks, during which their presence would surely become known. As it was, another hour or so should see them gone.

Huddled in her cloak, Brenna was at first unaware of the sound which brought her guard instantly to attention. When she recognized their concern and straightened warily, it was to hear the unmistakable thud of fast-approaching hoofs.

"Quick, my lady," one of the knights hissed, "into the bracken. We must hide."

About to obey, Brenna hesitated. The moon was almost set, but by what little light remained she could make out a party of horsemen approaching the cliff. By the shape of their helmets and the dull shine of their chain mail, she knew them to be *housecarls* in service to Harold, warriors even more adept and feared than the highly skilled *thegns* who usually carried out his missions. If he had sent these men, he must have good reason to believe their special brand

of ferocity and loyalty would be needed. As Brenna watched, the leader paused, turned in his saddle, and gazed in the direction Guyon had taken. Bile rose in her throat. A cloud, momentarily drifting across the moon, obscured his path. But in another instant the wind would blow it on and he would be discovered.

The knight, not understanding her delay, reached for her reins. Brenna evaded him. The sharp heels of her boots dug into her mount. Desperation gave her strength, and blotted out any thought except the absolute necessity of protecting Guyon.

"Help!" she screamed above the wind. "Over here! Help me!"

There was no mistaking the genuine terror in her voice, or the fact that she was an English woman in distress. As one, the *housecarls* turned and galloped toward her.

Brenna met them halfway, far enough to leave the Norman knights obscured by the shadows. Reining in, she gasped, "I am the Lady Brenna, kinswoman to King Harold. I am alone here and require your protection."

This announcement was met with some skepticism. The *housecarls* certainly knew who she was and that she had been traveling with Guyon D'Arcy. Further, they were aware that she had apparently gone with him willingly. Eyeing her narrowly, the leader demanded, "Where is your husband, lady?"

"Gone," Brenna declared steadily. From some hitherto unsuspected source she found the strength to speak calmly and authoritatively. "When I discovered he meant to tell William of the late king's will in order to promote an invasion, we argued. He left me

and sailed with his men. They left some two hours ago. I am sorry I could not stop them, but being only one lone woman . . ." Her voice trailed off regretfully.

"Gone?" the *housecarl* repeated angrily. "He cannot be. We have watched too carefully."

Brenna shrugged. "I can only tell you what I have seen, sir. Guyon D'Arcy and his men sailed two hours ago for Normandy. By this time, they are well beyond the reach of even your swiftest boat." Daringly, she added, "You have failed, my lord. I suggest you do not add to your dereliction by delaying my return to court. King Harold will surely wish to know all I can tell him."

It was a bluff that almost did not work. The *housecarl* was loath to believe his quarry had escaped. Beyond even the inevitable threat of the King's rage was his own pride in himself as a warrior. It seemed incredible that Guyon D'Arcy would have slipped through the noose so carefully set to catch him.

Yet just that claim was being made by a kinswoman of the sovereign. A woman, moreover, about whom Harold was deeply concerned. He had given strict orders she was not to be harmed. His men might privately joke that he feared the Lady Edythe's anger should her sister be mistreated, but they would not dare to disobey their lord. She had to be returned with all speed to the bosom of her family.

Glowering at the slight figure whose remarkable beauty would normally have had him on his mettle, the *housecarl* snarled, "I will escort you to the King, lady. But if you lie . . ."

"You dare much to question my honor," Brenna said frostily. "Rather you should hope I can explain your failure. Mayhap I will simply tell the King that Guyon escaped because no one was watching for him. . . ."

The *housecarl* relented. He did not dare risk being so ridiculed before the court. Death itself would be preferable to such disgrace. Giving in resentfully, he ordered his men to form up. So the lady wanted to go to London? So be it. No one would be able to say he delayed her in any way.

Three days later Brenna stood before King Harold in the council chamber at Thorney. Her clothes were filthy, her face ashen, and her legs so weak that she doubted she would be able to stand very long. Pride, coupled with her desire to get this meeting over with, had prevented her from protesting the merciless pace set by the *housecarls*. Pausing only to change horses and eat, they reached London in record time Immediately upon their arrival, Brenna was ushered into the new sovereign's presence. She was given no time to bathe or change, much less rest.

Hard gray eyes surveyed her inscrutably. "Where is he?"

"In Normandy, I suppose," Brenna murmured hoarsely. She was too weary even to be afraid, but nothing could blot out the knowledge that Harold Godwinson was enraged. Kingship had changed her kinsman. Clad in a magnificent blue tunic over a snow white shirt, with gold bands stretched across his chest and at each wrist, he had said farewell to the last vestiges of his youth. No longer the Earl Godwin's son or King Edward's lieutenant, he was King. And so he clearly intended to remain.

"You saw him leave."

"Yes," Brenna affirmed dully. Harold had not invited her to sit down, nor did she expect him to. Dimly, in the back of her mind, she considered what he might do with her. Whereas before she had always thought him a ruthless but fundamentally just man, the knowledge that he had tried to kill Guyon changed her perceptions drastically. It was not impossible that Harold would order her imprisoned or even tortured if he suspected for a moment she had information she was not revealing.

"From where?"

"Bulverhythe inlet." Brenna thought it was best to stick as closely as possible to the truth. Given her success in drawing off the *housecarls,* Guyon probably had carried out his original plan. She shivered, thinking of how he must be cursing her. His men would have reported her flight to the English. Guyon must believe her a traitor to their love, a disloyal wife who chose country over husband.

Perhaps it was just as well, she told herself despairingly. Who knew when they would meet again? Better for Guyon to be fired by anger rather than brought down by sorrow.

"Who sheltered you?" Harold demanded.

Brenna hesitated. She did not want to inform on the Norman residents of England who opened their homes to them. Somehow to betray them would be almost as bad as betraying Guyon. "We camped in the forest," she said at last.

Harold did not believe her. He thought it likely the vast, thickly wooded Weald might have protected them part of the time. But there were too many reports of sudden activity in Norman households,

servants sent away, and the like to believe Guyon had been without aid.

Neither did her story about an argument and angry parting ring true. Another woman might turn away from her husband under such circumstances, but not Brenna. She was too much Edythe's sister. Faithfulness even in the greatest adversity would be second nature to her.

Silently damning the *housecarls* who had so easily fallen for her ploy, he said, "Guyon planned well. I take it there were boatmen waiting?"

Puzzled by his mild tone, Brenna could only nod silently.

"How many?"

Frantically she scrambled to calculate what a likely crew would be for an escape boat. "Five . . . six . . . I'm not sure."

"So you weren't right on the beach with them?" Harold continued pleasantly. He supposed he really shouldn't be playing this game with her but it was mild revenge indeed for the damage done to him.

"N-no . . . I watched . . . from the cliff where your men found me."

"Oh, yes, my men. Do you know," he went on, strolling over to the table to pour himself a goblet of wine, "not one of them has been with me less than ten years. Absolutely trustworthy and as loyal as you could find anywhere. I can't tell you how amazed I am that Guyon got past them."

"He was l-lucky . . ."

Harold turned back abruptly, his piercing eyes raking her. "Lucky indeed, my lady. I just wonder if he knows how much."

Brenna did not dare respond. A terrible fear grew

in her that Harold was in no way misled by her lies. Taking a deep breath, she told herself it did not matter. Guyon would certainly be in Normandy by now. What happened to her was not important compared with his safety. Yet she could not prevent herself from asking, "What are you going to do with me?"

"Nothing like what you obviously expect," Harold snapped. Enraged he might be, but it would do no good to direct his anger at Brenna. No amount of suffering on her part could undo that fact of Guyon's escape. There would be enough pain and grief all too soon without wantonly adding to it with his own kinswoman.

"You will return to Winchester," he said. "The Lady Edythe leaves tomorrow. You will join her, and remain there." His face tightened. "I know your penchant for disobedience. Do not think for a moment that an escape attempt will be met by less than the harshest punishment. Give up any idea you may have of trying to join Guyon. You would not survive the effort."

"But I told you," Brenna protested in a last-ditch effort to make him believe her, "we argued and he left me. Why would I try to join him?"

Harold did not bother to reply. Instead, he said, "Make the most of the hours between now and morning, my lady. You will have little chance to rest before reaching Winchester."

Through the haze of her exhaustion and worry, Brenna wondered why it was necessary to make the trip in such haste. There was only one reason she could think of that would explain Harold's determination to have her sister speedily secluded within the

walls of his keep. What little color remained in her face vanished as she stared at him.

"You intend to marry."

Harold's head shot up. His eyes met hers, if only for an instant. Time enough to see the terrible pain within him. "I have no choice."

Torn between sympathy and outrage, Brenna opened her mouth to speak. The King raised a hand, as though to ward off a blow he thought well-deserved. "Go to your sister, Brenna," he said softly. "Perhaps you can comfort each other."

Chapter Fifteen

"Come and sit down," Edythe called. "All that standing can't be good for you."

Brenna turned reluctantly from her contemplation of the verdant fields and woods surrounding the keep. Summer was lingering a few weeks longer than usual. The crops were plentiful, the rivers and streams overflowed with fish, and there were signs the winter would be mild. God seemed intent on making up for the months of fear and dread earlier in the year.

The terrible streak of fire that had hung in the sky week after week, so bright that it could even be seen by day, was gone. The long-awaited invasion by Duke William had not yet come, and as the year waned it looked as though there would be no such action. People had a great deal to be thankful for and would seize the harvest time to do so.

True, King Harold still kept England's land and sea forces at full readiness. The *fyrd* remained in the field, supported by *housecarls* sent to train the army made up essentially of peasants. But everyone expected the men to be allowed to go home soon. They were needed to bring in the crops. There seemed little point in continuing to prepare for an invasion that each day seemed less likely to come.

Joining Edythe on the bench set before their sewing frames, Brenna patted her bulging stomach fondly. "He was kicking again last night, but now he's quiet. When he is born, I must talk to him about his refusal to sleep when I want to."

A smile touched the deep blue eyes that of late had been far too sad. "You're right to call the baby 'he'," Edythe assured her. "In my experience, it's boys who kick the most. Girls are far better behaved."

Since Edythe had three sons and two daughters, Brenna could only bow to her expertise. Privately, she prayed the child she was convinced had been conceived on that last night she shared with Guyon would be a boy, one who resembled his father. A tiny replica of her distant husband might ease at least a little of the remorseless pain whose burden she felt far more keenly than the child itself.

"Whichever it is," Brenna sighed, rubbing her back, "I hope it is born soon. I feel ripe enough to burst."

"It shouldn't be much longer," Edythe agreed. Her calm tone belied the silent concern with which she surveyed the protruding belly of her slightly built sister. Brenna was a small girl carrying a large baby. The birth would not be easy. Edythe had brought

many children into the world, but this was one delivery she would not attempt alone. Without saying anything to her sister, she had summoned to Winchester those women she knew to be most skilled at birthing and healing. Every possible precaution would be taken to assure Brenna came safely through the trial of childbed.

"Did I see a messenger arrive this morning?" Brenna asked, eager for any distraction.

Edythe nodded. Eyes on her sewing, she murmured, "He came from London. Harold says he is well and hopes to spend part of the fall here."

Brenna absorbed this information without comment. Since his coronation more than nine months before, the King had somehow contrived to spend several weeks at Winchester. Considering the vast demands on his time and energy, his devotion to Edythe and their family was surprising. Even more so in light of the fact that Harold now possessed a Christianly wedded wife who might properly expect his exclusive attention.

Edythe had said little when she learned of her lord's marriage to the sister of the Earls Edwin and Morcar. She did not have to be told how desperately Harold needed the support of the only men who held significant land in England outside his own family. If there had been no threat of invasion, the marriage would probably never have taken place. But as it was, Harold had to do everything possible to secure his power.

There was some consolation in the fact that Queen Aldyth, called by that title although Harold had not bothered to have her crowned, was some forty years old and regarded as plain. She was the widow of

King Griffith of Wales, killed by his own men after being defeated in battle by Harold. Aldyth seemed to bear her new lord no grudge for his role in her widowing, but neither did she pretend any great affection for him. They were reported to see each other rarely, and then only in the presence of others. The Earls Edwin and Morcar were known to be hoping that Aldyth would conceive. They envisioned a nephew who would be Harold's successor, with themselves as the true power behind the throne. But few believed their hopes were likely to be realized.

Harold himself had said, in the presence of witnesses, that he was not eager to impregnate Aldyth lest he find himself having to guard his back from her rapacious brothers. There were enough threats already to his life and power without adding more. To emphasize his distrust of Aldyth's kin, Harold kept his eldest son with him and together they returned as often as possible to Winchester and the woman who would always hold his heart.

"Has he had any more messages from William?" Brenna asked, picking up the tiny shirt she was stitching.

Edythe's lovely features darkened. "No, that upstart has kept his silence the last few months. When I think of the lies he dares to tell . . . How anyone could believe him, much less follow him . . ." She broke off, remembering that as far as anyone knew, Guyon D'Arcy was still very much in the Duke's service.

Brenna sighed, her own thoughts following a similar line. In the slightly more than nine months since she had last seen Guyon, there had been no opportunity for communication between them. She

was still far too carefully watched to send any messenger of her own and, although Duke William did not hesitate to dispatch communiques to England, Guyon apparently was not of like mind. He maintained a stubborn silence which increased Brenna's fear of what he must be thinking of her.

The child stirred within her, bringing a smile despite her worry. A hand on the enormous bulge sheltering her child, she said, "I don't think William cares if anyone believes him or not. He's just trying to manufacture an excuse for carrying out Edward's will. This claim of his that Harold swore an oath of loyalty to him is so preposterous as to be funny."

"Harold did not find it funny," Edythe declared. "Not when that absurd story was spread just as Tostig decided to come back. It's clear he and the Duke are acting in concert."

Brenna knew little of the King's exiled younger brother, but none of what she had heard was favorable. Tostig was the black sheep of the Godwinson clan, worse even than the first son, Sweyn, who had died in exile after seducing an abbess. Tostig's vices were not of the flesh. He loved power without understanding the responsibilities it carried. His tenure as Earl of Northumbria was marked by such hideous torment of the peasantry that not even Harold had been able to prevent the revolt against him. Bowing to the inevitable, he agreed to his brother's exile and by so doing made a lifelong enemy of him.

Tostig had spent the spring months harrying the southern coast of England, using men and ships believed to belong to William. As he burned and

pillaged in lightning attacks intended to soften English resistance, the Duke was busy on the diplomatic front. His people spread the story of an entirely fictitious journey by Harold to Normandy during which the Earl allegedly swore an oath of loyalty to William. If true, the oath would forever bar Harold from the English throne and make his assumption of it an act of the grossest impiety. But everyone in England knew the tale for a lie. Only in Rome was it listened to seriously, where the Pope welcomed any opportunity to bring the independent English into line. If William ever did invade, it would be under the papal banner.

"Where is Tostig now?" Brenna asked, after glancing around to be sure no one else could overhear their talk. Though Edythe's servants were undoubtedly loyal, it did not do to be careless.

"In Norway, Harold thinks. He believes Tostig has given up on William, who still does nothing but sit at the mouth of the Dives and build more ships. Harold suspects Tostig will try to convince the Norsemen that this is their last opportunity to take England. God knows they're crazy enough to try."

Brenna shared this assessment of the savages who had killed her mother. Never mind that she, like the majority of the English, was at least partially of Norse stock. Everyone knew the Vikings liked nothing better than to go to war. They would fight on the smallest pretext. "Hardrada," she said, referring to the Norwegian king, "would not ally himself with William, would he?"

"It isn't likely. They're both too fiercely independent and arrogant to work together. But just having

Hardrada as a threat makes it more difficult to defend against William." She hesitated before adding, "I fear the Duke is only waiting, building his strength and counting the days until Harold must release the *fyrd*. If Hardrada should also attack . . ."

"Don't think of that," Brenna said swiftly. It was inconceivable that England might be threatened on two fronts just when her defenses were weakest. "This balmy weather can't last. Soon there will be storms in the North Sea and Channel. No one will be able to get near us. We will be perfectly safe and Harold will be able to come home."

Edythe shot her a grateful look. It was on the tip of her tongue to say how much she missed her lord, but she stopped herself in time. Such a comment would be bound to remind Brenna of her own loss. Edythe knew her sister longed for her husband, her yearning all the more acute as her time came. Yet Brenna asked for no sympathy. She bore her grief bravely, making Edythe love her all the more.

The talk turned deliberately to household matters as each woman sought diversion from her thoughts. By midafternoon, Brenna felt unusually weary. She welcomed Edythe's suggestion that she lie down for a while. The small bower she occupied was one of several single-room structures surrounding the main hall. Their privacy and relative comfort was reserved for family and honored guests. Simply furnished with a narrow bed, wood chest, rough-hewn table, and two copper braziers, the room was nonetheless warm and cheerful. Bright hangings in intricate Celtic and Norse motifs enlivened the walls. A lush sable throw lay over the bed. Drying herbs hung

from the roof beams, their fragrance mingling with that of wood and smoke.

Stripping back the fur cover, Brenna lay down on the bed. She hoped to sleep, but found she could not. No position was even remotely comfortable. The dull ache that had begun that morning in her back worsened. Her belly itched, despite the oil she rubbed onto it each day. Her legs and feet throbbed, as though their burden was finally too much for them.

Wearily, Brenna padded over to the basin of fresh water left by her serving woman. Hoping the coolness would ease her headache, she splashed liberally at her face and throat. Clad only in a thin shift, she returned to the bed.

If she could not sleep, Brenna thought an hour later, she should get up and do something to occupy her mind. There was a new book she had yet even to open, and another she was barely halfway through copying. There was sewing to be done and weaving. Edythe would always welcome her help in the kitchens, where preparations were already underway for preserving the harvest. Knowing all this, she still did not move. Lethargy engulfed her even as sleep remained at bay.

The pressure in her belly continued to increase until Brenna could no longer ignore it. Somewhat concerned, she decided she needed company. She would go find Edythe, whose mere presence had a calming effect. Rising unsteadily, Brenna was almost dressed when a rush of water suddenly surged from between her thighs.

The tunic she had just donned was instantly soaked. Water ran down her legs and around her

feet, soaking through the rushes laid on the floor. Without even knowing that she did so, Brenna cried out.

Her serving woman, who had just been sent by Edythe to be sure everything was all right, heard her. Pushing open the door, she found Brenna standing dumb-faced in the center of the room, the dark stain on her clothes mute evidence of what had happened.

Not one to waste words, the serving woman snapped, "Back into bed, my lady. Nothing to worry about. Perfectly normal. We'll have you dry in no time."

Brenna stared at her mutely. She knew, of course, that the breaking of waters was a natural occurrence as childbirth neared. But knowing that and associating it with herself were two quite different matters. The life within her had suddenly become stunningly real. Biting her lip, she did as the woman said.

A shout from the servant brought several more running. One was sent for Edythe while the rest busied themselves easing Brenna's clothes from her and slipping her into bed. By the time her sister arrived, she was in the throes of the first contraction.

White-faced, Brenna gasped, "He seems fiercely determined to be born. This shouldn't take long at all."

"Of course not," Edythe agreed, although she actually believed the opposite. Speaking too quietly for Brenna to hear, she gave orders to the serving women. A braided rope was hung above the bed for Brenna to pull on. A knife, honed to razor sharpness, was slipped under her pillow to cut the pain. Clean linen was spread beneath her and fires lit

just outside the bower to keep water heated. Some distance beyond the keep, away from prying eyes, the throat of a ewe was slit and the animal's blood allowed to seep into the ground in the hope that the gods would be thus appeased.

When Brenna had been made as comfortable as possible, Edythe sat down beside her with her needlework in her lap. From time to time, she rose to sponge off Brenna's forehead, hold her hand, or murmur what encouragement she could. But there was little anyone could do as the hours passed and the pain grew.

"It is going well, my lady," the eldest of the midwives assured Brenna as lamps were lit against the gathering darkness. Taking Edythe aside, the grizzled old woman who had birthed thousands of babies explained that while the young girl was dilating slowly, the child was well-positioned. "Head down, he is, but big. Give her a few more hours, then we may have to cut."

Edythe nodded. She trusted the old woman and her younger colleagues who stood by to assist. The birth of her own first child had been an ordeal she did not care to remember, which she might well have not survived without the midwife's care.

Toward dawn the decision was made that Brenna required assistance. Her body simply could not open enough to free the child. Her agony was constant now, contorting her features and draining her strength. Soaked in perspiration, lips bleeding from the sharpness of her own teeth, Brenna sobbed helplessly.

"Just a little while longer," Edythe soothed. With mortar and pestle, she ground a paste of henbane

leaves which the midwife used to numb the area she would cut. When the knife was purified, two of the other women took Brenna's shoulders to hold her still. Such precaution was not necessary. She was too far engulfed in pain to even notice that the cut was made and her blood flowed onto the linens.

As soon as it was staunched, she was urged to her feet. "Come now, love," the midwife coaxed. "It will all be over soon. Walk, my lady. Just a little further. That's it."

Brenna whimpered as another massive contraction struck her. She was barely aware of Edythe urging her to kneel above the birthing pit lined in kidskin and surrounded by markings meant to protect the newborn. Held upright, Brenna strained with all her might to expel her child. Her body felt as though it was being torn in two. Never had she imagined such suffering possible. A scream broke from her as she convulsed in agony.

"That's it," Edythe urged. "Don't hold back. Push, Brenna! Push!"

Blind to anything but the overwhelming need to obey, Brenna summoned the last of her strength. Tears mingled with sweat to sting her eyes. Her throat felt raw. Every muscle in her throbbed in torment. This was death, she thought dully, and hell, all rolled into one.

The midwife sank to her haunches beside Brenna, ready to catch the baby. "I can see the head!"

"Push!" Edythe demanded. Her fingers dug into Brenna's shoulders as she shared in full her sister's suffering. "Again. Push!"

"No more . . ." Brenna sobbed. "Please, no more . . . Let me rest . . ." Another scream broke

as the head began to emerge. "Help me! Guyon, help me! Guyon . . ."

Blackness overwhelmed her. With a little whimper of welcome, Brenna slid unresistantly into the sweet release of unconsciousness.

The fragrance of fresh-gathered flowers woke her. Turning her head cautiously, Brenna stared at the bowl of blossoms set on the table near her bed. Edythe must have put them there, knowing they were her favorites. She smiled faintly as feeling, and memory, began flowing back into her body.

The baby! Where was it? What was it? Sitting up, she attempted to call out, only to be surprised by the weakness of her voice. Still, she was heard. The midwife bustled in, pleased to see her awake and alert.

"Don't try to move around too much, my lady," she cautioned, fluffing up the bolster. "You're bound to be feeling sore."

Sore did not quite express it. The entire lower half of her body throbbed to a dull ache, while the rest felt merely exhausted. But thought of the child blocked out all else. Impatient at being fussed over, Brenna demanded, "My baby? Where is he? Is he all right?"

The midwife grinned. "Sure it's a boy, are you? Well, I'll not keep you in suspense. You have a fine son, my lady. Came a bit overdue, but strong and healthy all the same. And squawling for his mother. Soon as you're set, the Lady Edythe will bring him in."

Brenna slumped back in the bed, smiling broadly. A son! God be praised. Already her arms ached to

hold him. The agony she had passed through only hours before was all but forgotten as she gazed eagerly toward the door.

Edythe's smile was every bit as wide when she entered with a small, swaddled bundle in her arms. Placing the baby at Brenna's breast, she said, "He's a beautiful child with all the proper accompaniment of fingers and toes. Not to mention iron lungs! Never have I heard a lustier cry."

Eyes widening in awe, Brenna gazed down at the tiny morsel of humanity that was her son. Feathers of golden hair lay against his well-shaped head. Lashes as thick as his father's cast shadows across down-soft cheeks. His features were unmistakably Guyon's from the broad forehead and straight nose to the chiseled lips and square jaw. But his chin was Brenna's, she saw with delight, wondering if he had also inherited her stubbornness. She watched enthralled as the baby awoke. His eyes were the same blue as all infants', but already she could see tawny streaks that showed what they would become. Lost to the wonder of it all, she was abruptly recalled to reality by her son's frustrated cry.

"He's hungry," Edythe said, patiently pointing out what should have been obvious. She stood by to offer any instruction that might be needed as Brenna shyly opened her sleeping gown. After rooting around blindly for a moment, the baby latched onto her nipple with unerring accuracy. His fierce grip made her yelp, but she settled down quickly as her first milk began to flow.

Reassured that the child's feeding was well in hand, Edythe perched on the edge of the bed. Her

fond expression hid not a little relief that Brenna had come through the ordeal safely. "Have you thought of a name?"

Brenna hesitated. It was a father's province to name his son. In Guyon's absence, she could only do her best. "I thought he would be called Alain."

Edythe was pleased at the choice. The old Celtic name meant "harmony." At a time of such uncertainty and danger, nothing greater could be hoped for a child. Watching the mother and infant so peacefully occupied, Edythe wished she could shelter them both from the onrush of events. But that was not possible. Brenna, no more than herself, would appreciate being kept in the dark.

"There is more news," she said reluctantly.

Fascinated though she was by her son, Brenna's attention turned instantly to her sister. Something in Edythe's tone hinted that the news was not good. "What has happened?" she asked softly.

Edythe looked down at her hands held firmly in her lap. "Duke William has sailed. He left Normandy the middle of last month with a vast fleet, many men, and even horses. A sudden storm caught him near mid-Channel and he was driven back. Since then, he has remained at the port of St. Valery, repairing the damage and making plans for another attempt. Some of Harold's agents saw him there and were able to report his condition."

"A storm," Brenna repeated faintly, unconsciously tightening her hold on the baby. "Then there must have been deaths."

Edythe nodded. "No one knows how many, but it is said many bodies were washed up on the coast and

hastily buried. But you must not think Guyon was among them. We can't even be sure he sailed with the Duke."

Brenna wanted desperately to believe her sister. But she knew there was little chance Guyon would have remained in Normandy. He was simply too trusted and valued to be left out of any such expedition. Knowing that, she still clung to the conviction that he was unharmed. "He must be all right," she murmured, "or I would surely know."

Edythe understood the sense of being so closely tied to another person that his death would resonate through her soul. She was willing to believe that Guyon was well, even as she privately wondered how long that condition would endure. Running a gentle finger along Alain's cheek, she said, "There is more. Hardrada is dead, at Harold's hand."

"He came ashore near York," Edythe explained, "and met the townspeople in battle at a place called Fulford. Tostig was with him. They killed many and won a great victory. Word of it reached Harold in London a few days later. He immediately gathered what men he could and marched north." The wide sapphire eyes unfocused, looking far beyond Brenna. "I have waited for him so many times, after so many battles. Always he returned unharmed, or at worst only slightly wounded. I tell myself it is the same this time, since the message says he is well. Yet somehow I feel . . . I don't know what exactly . . . a sense of something ominous . . . some fate that cannot be evaded."

"It is Hardrada's fate you feel," Brenna insisted, pulling herself higher in the bed to face her sister. "He is dead on English soil, possessing no more of

the land he sought to seize than what was needed for his grave. His death will be a warning to all who dare even to think of invading." Taking her sister's hand, she squeezed it lovingly. "Don't you see? This fight with Hardrada could be God-sent. He was certainly as strong an opponent as William, yet he fell quickly. The Duke will have to recognize England's ability to defend itself. He will give up his dreams of conquest and Harold will be able to rule in peace."

"Pray God you are right," Edythe sighed. "Surely something good must come from this. I know Harold admired the Norwegian King, but he would not hesitate to kill him in fair combat. Tostig, however, was another matter."

Brenna's throat tightened at the implication of this. "He died, too?"

Edythe's lovely features darkened as she nodded. Harold's traitorous brother had at last gone too far. "His life was forfeit. My lord killed him himself in single combat."

A shiver of superstitious dread ran through Brenna as she thought of what it meant to kill one's own brother. Political expediency, notwithstanding, Harold would be tarred with the same brush as Cain. Yet what else could he do? Tostig had already violated the peace of the land far too many times. As a rabid dog must be put down, he had to die.

Easing the still suckling infant to her other breast, Brenna sought for some way to comfort her sister. "With William's fleet damaged and Hardrada defeated, Harold's power will be greater than ever. He will be able to spend more time here with you and the children."

Edythe brightened slightly, although the shadows

remained in her eyes. Smiling at Alain, she said, "I would like to have another babe. It has been three years since little Gunluld's birth. For a while, I thought I could not conceive again. But now . . . I feel if only he comes back, together we will be able to do anything!"

Silently admiring her sister's strength and courage, Brenna turned the talk to children. By pretending greater ignorance of their care than she really possessed, she managed to keep Edythe well-distracted through the remainder of the day. Only once did the conversation falter, when a sudden gust of wind struck the bower. Unusual for that time of year, the wind came from the south, crossing the Channel to strike with rare strength against the coast of England. Brenna's smile faltered as she considered what might come on that wind.

Chapter Sixteen

ALAIN WAS ASLEEP AGAIN, OBLIVIOUS TO HIS MOTHER'S loving gaze. He was a good baby. Barely a week since his birth, he already had a solemn-eyed curiosity about the world that never failed to make Brenna smile. She spent hours playing with him, holding up interesting shapes and colors for his inspection and talking to him quite matter-of-factly about the strange place where he now found himself.

Edythe teased her about it. "He can't understand anything you say," she insisted laughingly.

"Of course he can," Brenna protested. A fat baby fist waved in her face made her beam with delight. "Look, he's smiling."

"He has gas," Edythe debunked, although she couldn't resist a closer look at her nephew. He was an unusually alert child. Already he could differentiate his mother from any other woman who held and

cared for him. He never cried except for those times when he needed to be changed or fed, when he let the whole world know his requirements in no uncertain terms. Despite his voracious appetite, he slept through most of the night without disturbing Brenna, who was recovering swiftly from his birth.

Without taking her eyes from him, his adoring mother said, "Admit it, Edythe, this is a paragon among babies. A tiny morsel of perfection somehow fallen into our midst." She was only exaggerating slightly. Born of exquisite ecstasy and equally profound sorrow, Alain would always be a miracle to her. She still could not quite believe that he had grown inside her body. Already it was only too easy to imagine him as a man as fierce and proud as his father. If only Guyon could see him . . .

Sadness darkened Brenna's eyes. It hurt her deeply that she could not even send word of the child to Normandy. Of course, even if she should somehow get permission for such a message, she had no clear idea of where Guyon might be. With Duke William still believed to be in St. Valery repairing his fleet, Guyon might well be there. Or he could have returned to his own lands to oversee the harvest. She could not bear to think of him at Falaise with the Lady Elene. That evoked images far too painful to contemplate.

Guessing the reason for her sudden silence, Edythe said gently, "Once all this talk of invasion has died down, perhaps Harold will send emissaries to Normandy. One of them could carry word to Guyon. It might even be possible for him to come here."

Brenna appreciated her sister's reassurance, but

she doubted there would be good relations between England and Normandy for some time yet. Certainly, Harold would not be eager to allow any of the Duke's barons into his kingdom, for any reason. Her best chance would be to try to return to Normandy herself, but that posed problems she could not yet begin to solve.

"You should try to rest more," Edythe went on. "I know you feel very well now, but there's no reason to rush your recovery."

Brenna grimaced, impatient with the lingering weakness of her body. She no longer hurt, but even the slightest effort tired her. Yet she knew she was doing far better than many new mothers. Properly grateful for her sister's skill and devotion which made Alain's birth so much easier than it might have been, she said, "I don't know what I would have done without you, Edythe. You are the best sister anyone could have. If there is ever anything I can do for you . . ."

Flushing, Edythe waved such praise aside. "Don't be silly. Just having you here is more than I could ask for." Hesitating, she added, "I know you miss Guyon dreadfully, and I sympathize with your unhappiness, but I am still selfish enough to be glad of your company. Otherwise, these last months would have been so bleak."

Brenna nodded understandingly. Despite the continued proof of Harold's love, his marriage had struck Edythe hard. Many tears and sleepless nights put shadows beneath her eyes. Though still undeniably beautiful, she no longer possessed the radiance of a secure, content woman. Instead there was a new vulnerability about her that in some ways made her

loveliness all the more poignant. In the face of her sister's travail, Brenna's love for her could only deepen. She could not ease her pain, but she could at least share it.

"My company," she insisted, "is small recompense for all you have done. I say again, if there is ever anything I can do for you, you have only to say."

The opportunity to fulfill that pledge came sooner than Brenna would have thought. Some two days later, as she was bathing Alain in a specially warmed and draft-free room, a great clamor in the bailey caught her attention. As the noise mounted, Brenna reluctantly turned the child over to a serving woman and went to investigate.

The open area in front of the main hall was filled with people. They were talking urgently among themselves, some calling out the news to those just arriving.

"There has been another battle!"

"A big one!"

"In the south, they say. Near Hastings."

"Couldn't be. The King could never have gotten there so fast."

"He was in London just days ago, to rest his men after Stamford Bridge. No way he could have put them in the field again so quickly."

A burly blacksmith, towering above the rest, nodded sagely. "More foolish gossip. Pay it no mind. Who knows who really sent those messengers."

"They look real enough," a breweress insisted. She regarded the two exhausted men at the center of the crowd compassionately. "Ridden hard, they

have. Look like they've been in a battle themselves."

"Don't be so quick to say the King couldn't reach the south this fast," advised a young priest, flushed with excitement. "If any man in the world could rally his force coming out of a major battle and take them the length of the country in just a few days, it's Lord Harold. He's as great a leader as we'll ever have. God keep him safe."

"Amen!" the crowd muttered, although some with less optimism than others. All eyes were on the Lady Edythe, who had drawn the messengers same little distance off and was speaking with them quietly.

Brenna watched, stomach slowly tightening, as her sister's face went as white as the veil covering her glorious copper hair. Without pausing to think, she forced her way through the crowd to Edythe's side. "What is it?"

Swaying slightly, Edythe was not at first able to respond. The slender hand that went to her throat trembled helplessly. Only years of rigorous courage and discipline enabled her to regain control. "There has been a battle," she said slowly. "In the south. These men left before it began, so they have no word of the outcome. But they say William's second attempt to cross the Channel met with great success. He landed with many men and horses. A vast army against my lord's men . . . who came by forced march from London."

Brenna struggled to digest all this. She was puzzled by why Harold would send messengers before a battle, rather than wait until immediately afterward.

Not until she spied the boy standing next to Edythe did she understand the King's reasoning. He had sent his son back to Winchester, to his mother and the safest place he knew.

Harold's actions spoke more clearly than any words of his concern. This was a far different matter than his rout of Hardrada at Stamford Bridge. The difficulties of the Channel crossing would not have tired William's men anywhere near as much as the forced march from London must have exhausted the already battle-weary *fyrd*. The English troops had a decided disadvantage in any conflict against William, one not all their training or even the fact that they fought on their own land might be able to overcome.

Apprehensively, Brenna glanced at the messengers who were so bone-tired they could hardly stand upright. Thinking that the sooner they were removed from the crowd's view the better, she said, "I will arrange food and sleeping quarters for these men, if they will come with me. . . ."

They followed her gratefully. When she had them settled in the kitchens before bowls of steaming stew and mugs of ale, Brenna went in search of her sister. She found her in the chapel. Edythe did not seem to be praying. Her eyes were open, staring unfocused at the plain wood cross hung over the altar. She stood stiffly, her arms limp at her sides. Her face was paler than ever and her breath came shallowly.

"Edythe?"

No response. Brenna edged closer. She had never seen her sister like this. The brave, stalwart woman she knew seemed to have vanished. There was nothing left but a beautiful shell that appeared close to crumbling. "Edythe!"

The slender shoulders quivered. Her voice, when it came at last, was barely a whisper. "I . . . must go . . . to him . . . He must not be alone . . ."

Brenna swallowed hard. She had no idea what had so possessed her sister. Certainly, the circumstances were not good and Harold might very well be in grave danger. But the idea that she should go to him . . .

"It will be over by now," Brenna murmured gently, easing an arm around the other woman. "Messengers will come soon, and then Harold himself. You will see."

Edythe shook her head. Still staring straight ahead, she said: "No one will come. My lord . . . needs me . . . I must go."

Knowing full well that she was not the sole member of her family afflicted with intransigence, Brenna doubted there was much use in trying to argue with Edythe. But still she had to try. "It would be better to stay here, with the children. He will expect you to. What if he comes here and you are gone? Harold will be very worried."

"You don't understand," Edythe whispered, turning at last to face her sister. "He cannot come. It is up to me." She drew a deep breath that shivered in her throat. "I will leave in the morning. The children will stay here. They should be safe, at least for a while."

Deeply worried, not the least because she had the dread sense that Edythe saw something she did not, Brenna said, "Then I will come with you. You cannot go alone."

"No," Edythe insisted. "It is too dangerous. Stay here, until something can be worked out."

"You said," Brenna reminded her softly, "that you valued my company."

A silent battle waged within Edythe. She did not want to go alone. A great chasm of fear lay just before her and she was afraid she would not be able to cross it. If anyone could help her, it was Brenna. But how could she put her own sister in such peril?

Brenna had no difficulty divining the other woman's thoughts. Quietly, she said, "One of the last things Guyon said to me was that he had finally accepted the fact that I would not be left behind. If a stubborn Norman can face up to the inevitable, you should too."

The vision of Brenna obstinately following her to Hastings restored a little of the light to Edythe's eyes. "It is true," she admitted, "that I would like you to come with me."

"Then it's settled," Brenna declared. Briskly, she set about making the necessary arrangements. "Tomorrow morning, you said? Very well. We will need ponies, food, men. Thank heaven the weather is warm. How many days will it take? Five? Six? We can camp in fields at night, there are plenty of streams. Fodder will be no problem." A smile touched her delicate features. "Years from now, I will tell Alain how he made his first journey to meet his uncle." Silently, she added, "And perhaps, if God is truly merciful, his father as well."

At the mention of the baby, Edythe looked aghast. "You mean to take him with you? Oh, of course you do. I should have realized you would not leave him. Brenna, you must reconsider. It is far too dangerous. Bad enough you should come along, but with an infant . . . No, I cannot allow it."

A look Guyon would have recognized crossed Brenna's face. "It's too late to reconsider. We have already agreed I am to go. As for Alain, the trip will be good for him. With all the women here, he is becoming spoiled."

"But the journey will be difficult," Edythe began in a last-ditch effort to convince her sister she should stay behind, "and who knows what perils we may face. It would be better for you to—"

"I've made up my mind," Brenna interrupted firmly. She was not above taking advantage of Edythe's distress to get what she wanted. "Now I will send your serving woman to you. You are very pale and it might be a good idea to lie down for a while. In the meantime, I will speak with the *housecarls*. We will be ready to leave at dawn." Before Edythe could say another word, Brenna hurried from the chapel. She spent the rest of the afternoon in frenetic activity, using the myriad tasks that had to be seen to before they left to keep her thoughts at bay.

Lying in a carrier slung across her front, Alain slept peacefully. He woke only to suckle before drifting back into his infant dreams. Brenna envied his composure. It was all she could do to keep a calm face and not let the servants see her growing fear. She could not exactly say that Edythe had the sight—that mysterious and terrifying gift of seeing into the future—but her sister had often sensed events before they became generally known. It was never a good idea to disregard Edythe's concerns; too many times they had proved well-founded.

Unable to sleep that night, Brenna spent most of it stitching a shirt for Guyon. She had no idea if he

would ever wear it, but the simple action somehow brought her closer to him. From time to time, she glanced at Alain in his cradle. His eyes were closed but she had noticed that day that they were already the same tawny shade as his father's. Her throat tightened as she wondered yet again when Guyon might see his son, or what his reaction would be when he did.

Crumbling the shirt on her lap, Brenna wondered if Guyon might deny the child's parentage. He had been conceived such a short time before they parted, and the cause of their separation could be so easily misunderstood, that any man might be pardoned for doubting his wife's fidelity. Brenna herself knew how easy it was to cast a bad light on the most innocent occurrences. Hadn't she been guilty of just that at Falaise? If Guyon had spent these last months believing she had betrayed him, how unlikely he would be to simply welcome their reunion, especially when she brought a child with her.

Some part of Brenna's mind understood that she was worrying over Guyon's reaction in order to block out the fear that he might not be at Hastings. If there was a battle, there would be deaths on both sides regardless of the final outcome. For Edythe's sake, she had to pray that Harold was alive and victorious. But for her own, she uttered a fervent plea that Guyon—even if a prisoner—would be unharmed. Nothing else, not even his acceptance of Alain, mattered as much.

Toward dawn, Brenna managed to doze briefly. She woke with a start when her serving woman entered the bower. "The men are ready, my lady,

and your sister awaits you. Is there anything you want me to pack?"

Brenna shook her head, as much to clear it as in response. She had gathered together some clothing for herself and Alain the night before. Gesturing to the bundle, she said, "Just take that out to the pack horse. I will follow quickly."

Pausing only long enough to wash her face and swallow some small amount of the food the woman had brought, Brenna hurried to the bailey. Alain slept peacefully in her arms. She could nurse him on the road, or when they stopped for rest. Securing the blanket around him, she looked for Edythe.

Her sister was saying farewell to the children. The two boys, the eldest just thirteen, and the three girls, including three-year-old Gunluld, made a solemn group. They were far too well-trained to weep, but their anxiety was clear. Many times they had seen their father go away, but never before had their mother set off without him. That break in the order of their lives, added to the tension pervading the keep, made them fearful. Something was happening they could not understand.

The younger children clung to their mother until the nursemaids gently eased them away. Edythe's eyes were misted as she touched her eldest son's head tenderly. "You must set an example for your brothers and sisters," she murmured. "Help them to be brave."

The boy nodded somberly. "I will, mother. Don't worry, we will be all right. We will await your return . . . and father's . . ." His voice trailed off as he bit his lip hard to keep back his sobs. He was

almost a man, son of the bravest and noblest king in the world. He would be worthy of his heritage. Turning to the senior *housecarl,* the boy said firmly, "I charge you to care for my mother. Guard her with your life and protect her from all harm."

The man inclined his head respectfully. In the grave-eyed child he saw the promise of the father he followed with unswerving loyalty. The frustration he felt at not being with his lord on the battlefield eased a bit. Leading the Lady Edythe's horse forward, he helped her to mount.

Final admonitions were given and farewells exchanged before the party rode past the high, timbered wall around the keep and into the great forest of the Weald.

For four days they followed the forest path as it wound southeast toward the chalk cliffs guarding the coast. The air grew chiller, though not uncomfortably so. The leaves began to change, turning the woods ablaze with orange and yellow and crimson. From time to time they passed the low huts of peasants. To these people, who hurried to greet them as soon as they saw they were English, they gave what news they could but got none in exchange. No one had passed that way, heading north, since Harold's last messengers.

On the fifth day, the trees began to thin. They were nearing the high ground of Telham Hill north of Pevensey Bay. Brenna grasped her child more closely to her as they approached the spot where she and Guyon had been separated. Memories of that day almost ten months before flooded back, so absorbing her that she did not at first notice the men heading toward them.

Only when their escort reined in sharply did she realize anything unusual was happening. Some fifty yards down the road, a rag-daggled band of Englishmen was moving slowly. Several of the men limped, others needed the support of their comrades. One lay on a stretcher slung between two ponies. As they drew closer, Brenna could see dirt and blood stains on their leather jerkins and torn tunics. Some were weaponless, others without the shields customarily carried by the *fyrd*. All looked beyond exhaustion.

The senior housecarl turned to Edythe. "Wait here, my lady." His tone was courteous but with an undercurrent of steel that allowed no argument. Brenna edged her horse closer to her sister's. A muscle twitched in Edythe's jaw. Her knuckles shone white against the reins. Waves of tension radiated from her as her attention locked on the scene taking place just up the road.

The men stopped when they saw the *housecarl* approach. They stood quietly on the edge of the road as he questioned them. A few spoke, most remained silent. Brenna saw heads droop, shoulders sag. She saw the *housecarl* stiffen and say something sternly to which the men replied with a hopeless shrug. Eyes, deep set in weary faces, looked past the mounted warrior to the group behind him. Eyes that brushed over the two women and were quickly averted.

The *housecarl* turned and rode back to them. His face was gray and he could speak only with great difficulty. "M-my l-lady . . ."

Edythe held up a hand. "Not yet," she whispered thickly. "Let them pass first."

The men shuffled by slowly. Their surreptitious

glances showed that they recognized the beautiful woman sitting so straight and proud on the caparisoned horse. The profound sorrow of their expression told the rest. Without any word being said, the leather helmets they wore were pulled off. Bareheaded, they moved past. Last in line was a young man of not more than fifteen years. He paused before Edythe, glancing up at her hesitantly. A dark flush suffused his grime-streaked face as he murmured, "My lady, we tried. Truly we did." In the reddened eyes raised to the beautiful woman was a heart-wrung plea for forgiveness, not simply from Edythe but from all of English womanhood shorn of protection from the conqueror.

Compassion softened Edythe's features. She leaned forward in the saddle, touching a hand to the boy's brow. "Go back to your home, lad," she said gently. "The harvest is bountiful and your family must need you. This is what my lord would wish."

The boy nodded mutely. Tears ran down his hollow cheeks as he moved on. When he was gone, the *housecarl* rasped, "The Normans are camped just over the next rise, at Senlac Meadow. We must turn back."

Edythe turned to him, but long moments passed before her eyes focused on the battle-hardened veteran hard pressed to contain his despair. Some far different scene held her inner gaze. "No," she said with unexpected firmness. "I must go on."

"My lady!" the *housecarl* protested, "you cannot. There . . . there is nothing you can do."

Edythe's chin lifted stubbornly. Her voice trembled but her intent was clear. "You are wrong. There is one more service I may do my lord." She paused,

looking around at the shocked faces of the escort which was just beginning to fully understand what had happened. More gently, she continued, "I will understand if you do not wish to accompany me. There has been too much death here already to risk more lives. You will stay with my sister, to protect her and the child."

Now it was Brenna who objected. "No! We began this journey together and so we will end it. With or without the escort, I am going with you."

"The baby . . ." Edythe began in an effort to dissuade her.

". . . must live with the consequences of what has happened here," Brenna interrupted. "I cannot protect him from them. We both know that."

Reluctantly, Edythe nodded. Turning back to the escort, she said, "I realize that your oath of loyalty to my lord binds you to guard us. But I now release you from it. You have families of your own to be concerned about. Go back to them."

"Do you think us so low that we would abandon you?" the *housecarl* growled. "Which of us could face our family if we let you go on alone?" The other men nodded firmly. Without waiting for orders, they formed up around the women in a guard of honor made all the more impressive by the ease with which it could be destroyed.

In silence, the little band moved on. The day grew warmer. A few last flies buzzed the horses. A flock of geese swooped overhead, turning south. Alain fussed a little in his mother's arms but she was able to quickly soothe him. As they neared the rise above Senlac Meadow, sounds began to reach them. The wind carried the crackle of cookfires, relaxed laugh-

ter, the neighing of horses, and something more—the stench of death.

Topping the ridge, the party halted. Brenna breathed in harshly. Across the soft ground washed by early autumn sunlight lay bodies, so many that their number was beyond imagining. Many lay with arms and legs flung out, some still locked in combat with the enemy. Scavengers were already at work. Though it was day, wolves and wild dogs prowled the edges of the clearing, dragging off severed limbs or even whole corpses. Most of the dead were English, already stripped of clothing and armor. Though they were now beyond all pain, the piercing vulnerability of those naked forms made Brenna choke.

She fought back tears as Alain began to whimper. Even to one so young, the pervasive sense of desolation was unmistakable. Automatically murmuring to him, Brenna dragged her gaze past the dead to the camp set up on the edge of the battlefield.

Gaily colored banners raised above bright-hued tents waved in the breeze. Men lounged in front of the tents, drinking wine, talking among themselves, or sleeping. Nearby a makeshift corral held several hundred war horses which servants were busy feeding and watering. Supply wagons at the camp's perimeter were being rapidly unloaded. Before a freshly dug pit, rows of shrouded bodies lay waiting for burial. Brenna watched as a priest moved among them sprinkling holy water.

At the center of the camp stood the largest and most luxurious of the tents. Covering almost as much ground as a good-sized hall, it was made of

dark blue canvas trimmed in red. An awning above the entrance was held in place by two spears taller than any man. Above the tent fluttered a banner Brenna quickly recognized as belonging to Duke William.

Lifting a hand, she pointed. "There."

Edythe followed her direction. She stared at the tent in silence. The *housecarl* looked also. Clearing his throat, he said, "Let me go first, my lady. To explain who you are and secure safe passage for you."

Still looking at the tent, Edythe murmured, "Who will secure your safety? Rather than watch you cut down, I will go first."

Despite his protests, Edythe took the lead. With Brenna beside her and the men drawn up just behind, they headed down into the camp. Relaxed though the victorious Normans might be, they were not so confident as to let their guard drop completely. Sentries spotted the small band while it was still on the ridge. As they moved toward the meadow, Norman knights rode out to meet them.

Only the presence of women kept them from instantly drawing their weapons. That and Edythe's quick order to her men not to go for their own arms. She addressed the knights steadfastly. "I am the Lady Edythe, handfast wife to King Harold Godwinson. I wish to see your Duke."

The young Norman leading the group stared at her in unbridled astonishment. He had heard of the exquisitely beautiful mistress who shared Harold's bed and life, but never had he expected to meet her. Certainly not under such bizarre circumstances.

Stuttering, he murmured, "L-lord William will b-be surprised, my lady. Y-you really should not be h-here."

Edythe stared him down impatiently. "But I am here, and when that becomes known, the Duke will not appreciate your delay in bringing me to him."

Instinctively responding to the voice of authority, the knight inclined his head. Whatever doubts he still had were smothered by the urgent desire to turn the problem over to someone else. Ordering his men to surround the English but not harm them, he led the way into the camp.

The ordinary post-battle tasks of cleaning weapons, counting booty, and relating exploits ceased as they passed. Men glanced at the party, looked away, then stared in wide-eyed amazement as they realized what they were seeing. Before they reached the Duke's tent, a small group had collected behind them. Brenna stayed close to her sister as the *housecarls* looked around warily. Only great discipline and concern for the women kept them from drawing the weapons their hands itched to hold.

The young knight vanished into the tent to relate the news that was undoubtedly already known. He reappeared almost at once. "This way, my lady. The Duke will receive you." In his excitement, his breath came in pants, reminding Brenna of an overexerted puppy. She fought down an hysterical desire to laugh and followed Edythe.

William sat before a low camp table on which maps were spread. He looked much as Brenna remembered; tall, well-built, remorseless. The smile he permitted so often at Falaise was missing. He wore chain mail and a long sword buckled to his

side. His conical helmet rested on the table beside him. He needed to bathe and shave, but seemed unharmed. A solemn-faced priest stood nearby, clear reminder that William had invaded with papal approval. Spying Edythe, the clergyman whispered something to his lord.

Whatever he said had no effect. While the priest stared at her in offended shock, Edythe was courteously received by the Duke. He rose and met her halfway across the tent. "My lady, I cannot say you are expected, but you are welcome. Be assured everything will be done for your safety and comfort."

If she was surprised by William's graciousness, Edythe gave no sign. Holding herself stiffly, she said, "You know why I have come, sir. Where is my lord?"

William sighed. He returned to the table, gesturing Edythe to take the seat near him. Quietly, he said, "Harold is here. At least, we think he is."

Brenna frowned at the words, puzzled. But Edythe seemed to understand them. She blanched, clasping her hands tightly in her lap. "You are not sure?"

The Duke looked at her closely, as though trying to gauge her strength. After a moment, he shook his head. "Alas, no. You will understand that we wish to be certain. But circumstances are such that there is some disagreement."

So softly that the Norman had to lean closer to hear her, Edythe said: "I can be of assistance to you."

Brenna's gaze went from her sister to the Duke in bewilderment. Her arms ached from holding Alain

so long, but she barely noticed it. William's attention was focused on Edythe, but when the baby nuzzled Brenna's breast, the motion caught his eye. The Duke's gaze swept over her, registering the changes that had in no way impaired her beauty. Most particularly, he took in the fact of the infant she cradled. Speculation fled as he noticed the soft, golden hair, unmistakable features, and tawny eyes. A slight smile touched his hard mouth. It was a day for surprises.

Abruptly, William nodded. "Your help would be appreciated, my lady."

"It is not offered freely," Edythe informed him.

William brushed that aside. "We will discuss what you want later. Now I suggest you accompany my knights. They will take you to your lord."

As Edythe rose, Brenna turned to accompany her. She settled Alain more comfortably against her, wondering how soon she would be able to nurse him. He was hungry and her breasts ached with milk. Her free hand caressed the child's cheek tenderly when a sound at the front of the tent caught her attention. She looked up just as Guyon entered. Frozen in place, Brenna could not move or speak. She stood powerless, clasping their child, as her husband stared at her.

Chapter Seventeen

BRENNA'S GAZE DEVOURED HIM ARDENTLY. FOR LONG moments, she forgot where she was and what terrible events had brought her there. Her fevered dreams of the last months had not been in error. Guyon was every inch as magnificently male as she remembered.

His hair, tousled and begrimed though it was, glowed like spun sunlight. Deeply tanned, his rugged features were no less handsome for being caught in stunned surprise. Beneath his armor, his tall, powerful body moved gracefully. All the love that possessed her swelled within Brenna, threatening to burst her heart.

After the first piercing moment of awareness, her eyes moved over him apprehensively. His chain mail was gashed near the left shoulder, but there was no sign of bleeding. Other numerous cuts and tears had

not penetrated beneath the layers of metal sewn to toughened leather. One wrist sported a livid bruise, but there again a mail glove had saved him. Reassured that he carried no wound, Brenna blushed as she became aware of a scrutiny no less keen than her own.

After dwelling hungrily on her face, Guyon's gaze drifted down over her body, only to be stopped abruptly by the sight of the infant in her arms. He gasped and took a quick step forward. She had to force herself to stand perfectly still as a hard, callused hand lifted the edge of the blanket from Alain's face. Thick, golden lashes fluttered momentarily against apricot-tinged cheeks. He made a soft mew of protest at the disturbance, but did not wake. Blissfully unconcerned about anything other than a full stomach and dry wrapper, the baby slept on. Guyon in no way matched his son's serenity. His hand shook as he carefully replaced the blanket. The eyes he raised to Brenna's were dark with shock. "W-when . . . ?

Brenna's stomach lurched. If she had been in full possession of herself, she would have realized the question was perfectly natural. But the horrors she had just passed through banished reason. To her, it seemed only that Guyon was asking when the baby was born because he doubted his parentage. Grimly, she remembered the old joke that few men could count above nine, but that they always managed perfectly. A choking sense of betrayal filled her. She was perversely glad when the Duke's interruption prevented her from responding.

"Guyon, you are here. Good. I want you to escort the Lady Edythe to the medical tent."

Tearing his eyes from Brenna, albeit with great difficulty, Guyon objected. "But my lord, surely you do not mean . . ."

"The Lady," William interjected, "has offered to assist us. Since our purposes agree with hers, I have agreed." More gently, he added, "Do you suggest I send someone else with her?"

Unspoken was the reminder that Guyon, through his marriage, was the Lady Edythe's kinsman. It was his right, indeed his obligation, to stand beside her. Compassion swept over him as he gazed at the silent, white-faced woman. The two sisters might not resemble each other, he thought ruefully, but when it came to strength and courage they were a match. Holding out a hand, he said softly, "If you will allow me . . ."

Edythe nodded distantly. A merciful blanket of numbness was settling over her, preparing her for what was to come. She rose, taking Guyon's arm. He supported her unobtrusively, feeling the slight quiver that ran through her slender form.

"Your wife may await you here," the Duke was saying. Before Brenna could do more than open her mouth to object, Guyon shook his head. His gaze held hers as he said. "I believe my lady prefers to accompany her sister."

William hesitated, thinking any woman, particularly one so shortly come from childbed, should be spared the sight of what lay in the medical tent. But he was not disposed to interfere between a man and wife. Shrugging, the Duke stepped aside.

Following Guyon and Edythe from the tent, Brenna took some little comfort in the fact that he had referred to her as "my lady." At least there was

to be no outright repudiation until they could talk further. Crossing the camp, she kept her eyes averted. Curious stares burned into her back and she was all too aware of the muttered comments. The rage of battle had not quite died away. Only the Duke's absolute authority and Guyon's presence kept them from being challenged.

Pausing before the tent, Guyon spoke softly to his sister-in-law. He tried one last time to convince her not to go on. When she insisted, he turned to Brenna. "I understand your wish to be with Edythe, but I cannot let you go inside without preparing you. What you will see is very bad. We believe Harold died quickly, but what happened afterward was an atrocity."

Brenna swallowed hard. Since encountering the defeated English troops, she had fought against the realization that the King must be dead. He was not a man to surrender. Forced at last to face the truth, she was hard pressed to keep from crying out in anquish. Only the knowledge that Edythe needed her held her still.

Sunlight filtering through the open tent flap fell across a small space empty except for a priest keeping vigil over a blanket-covered form. The man looked up in surprise when they entered. Anything he might have said was silenced by Guyon's harsh look. Unable to leave without a formal dismissal, the priest still managed to make himself as unobtrusive as possible. He all but faded into the tent wall as Guyon knelt beside the body. Gently he drew aside the blanket.

Bile rose in Brenna's throat. She covered her

mouth to keep from screaming. Instinctively, she tried to move between her sister and the pitiful remains of what had been Harold Godwinson. But Edythe forestalled her. Kneeling next to Guyon, she reached out a trembling hand to touch her lord. Her mouth quivered helplessly and spasms wracked her body, but she made no sound.

Smothering her horror, Brenna drew closer. She took a deep breath, holding it and all else within her as she lowered herself beside Edythe. For long moments she looked only at her sister, watching as the deep blue eyes grew luminescent. Tears slid mutely down her ashen cheeks. A chill danker than the grave radiated from her. But for the tears which now flowed freely, she might have been carved from living stone. Nothing less than courage born of the greatest love enabled her to confront the horror before them.

Harold's eyes had been gouged out. One leg and part of an arm were missing. He bore the marks of countless sword stabs inflicted after death, and he had been castrated. It was doubtful his own mother could have recognized him. But to Edythe there was no question of his identity.

On what remained of his chest, she saw the scar inflicted in the last battle against the Welsh. On the intact arm was the lesion received accidentally on the training field when he was fifteen. Near his collarbone, she saw the mark left by a flying ember which had struck him one Christmas five years before. The hand she lifted to her lips still bore the mole she had always teased him about, calling it a beauty spot. A low moan tore from her as she bowed

her head, cascades of coppery hair trailing across the mutilated flesh.

"It is he?" Guyon asked thickly.

Unable to speak, Edythe could only nod. She clasped the hand more closely to her as her body began to rock back and forth. For long moments, neither Guyon or Brenna moved. All differences were forgotten. Their common humanity recoiled from a sacrilege nothing could excuse.

At last, Guyon gathered himself and rose. Gently but determinedly, he lifted Edythe from the floor. When she did not relinquish Harold's hand, Brenna took it from her tenderly, lowering it next to his body. With reverence, she replaced the blanket before joining her husband and sister at the door. The last of Edythe's strength gave way. Her legs buckled just as Guyon swept her up, carrying her back to William's tent. Once there, he set her carefully on a bench before removing his cloak and wrapping it around her. The Duke, who had been speaking with some of his lieutenants, dismissed them immediately upon their return. He looked questioningly at Guyon, who nodded, then poured a goblet of wine and placed it in Edythe's hand. After a moment, he murmured, "I want you to know that the men responsible for the atrocity have already been sent back to Normandy. I want none such in my service."

Edythe did not seem to hear him. She ignored the wine, which slipped unheeded from her grasp. Guyon caught the goblet, setting it back on the table. Sitting down beside her sister, Brenna embraced her tightly. Wordlessly, she tried to share her

own strength and warmth. But Edythe seemed beyond any reach. Her voice, when she finally spoke, seemed to come from a great distance. "My lord must be buried. With the proper rites."

William hesitated barely an instant before nodding.

Without showing any awareness of that gesture, Edythe continued dully. "I will take him back to Winchester . . . to the cathedral there. It is the only church he really liked. He said it made him feel closer to God. He will lie there, undisturbed. . . ." Her voice droned on, until another spasm wracked her body and she fell silent once more.

William sighed. A deep frown etched his forehead. Slowly, he said, "I have agreed that the late King will receive proper burial. Nothing more."

Several seconds passed before his meaning reached Edythe. When it did, she looked up swiftly. "You mean I cannot . . . ?"

"You cannot remove his body," William said flatly. "There must be no shrine to a martyred English king, and that is exactly what his grave would become if I allowed you to do as you wish." Looking away, the Duke concluded, "I will go so far as to allow your kinsman, Guyon, to supervise your lord's internment. But more I cannot do. Now you must leave here."

"L-leave?" Brenna choked, barely able to suppress a scream of denial. Alain whimpered as her grip on her sister tightened and he was squeezed between them.

"The Lady Edythe must leave," William explained tonelessly. "I will grant safe passage to her

and her children, but only if she agrees to depart England as quickly as possible. Were she in full possession of her faculties," he added determinedly, "she would see the wisdom of this."

Brenna was beyond speech. She could only shake her head in dazed disbelief. Guyon's voice, speaking to her urgently, barely penetrated her tortured mind. "There is no choice, Brenna. It must be like this." He faltered, then went on, "I know you need some time alone with Edythe. The Duke and I will . . . see to the arrangements . . ."

William nodded quickly, glad of an excuse to leave the tent. Witnessing Edythe's agony, it was all too easy to think how but for the luck of a final desperate charge, the grief-stricken widow would have been his Lady Matilda. Outside in the sunlight he could give silent thanks for his life without feeling profane.

When they were alone in the tent, Brenna did not move or speak for long moments. An agonizing struggle waged within her as she fought to regain control. When her heartbeat at last slowed and her breath steadied to less than painful gasps, she found the wine goblet and lifted it again to Edythe's colorless lips.

This time her sister managed to drink a little. When she seemed somewhat more aware of her surroundings, Brenna asked softly, "You heard . . . ?"

Edythe nodded mutely. Her eyes were dark pools of suffering as she murmured, "I should have known he would not let me take him. He is truly merciless."

"He will spare the children," Brenna reminded her desperately. Instinct made her try to focus

Edythe's mind on the future. Anything to keep the dark mists of despair from claiming her.

"The children . . ." A tiny flicker of light appeared in Edythe's eyes. "The children . . . I must get them away . . . Quickly . . . Before he changes his mind." Straightening slightly, she said, "Harold has a foster brother in Ireland. We can go there. Before the weather worsens." A hint of wistfulness entered her voice. "We were there before, you remember? Years ago when all the Godwinsons were exiled. Such a beautiful country. I was happy there . . ."

"And the children will be safe," Brenna said swiftly. "You can get them beyond harm in less than a fortnight, if messengers are sent to Winchester at once and the packing begun."

"It has already started. I gave instructions to pack before we came here."

Brenna stiffened. "You knew."

A long sigh escaped Edythe. "I . . . felt so cold . . . As though something deep within me was ending. Not even when our mother died or when I lost my fourth son so shortly after his birth did I feel that way. There was no doubt of the cause."

Blinking back tears, Brenna nodded. She could not help but contrast her own certainty that Guyon was still alive with what that same inner sight had meant to Edythe. To live with such knowledge . . . She trembled.

Edythe needed no words to understand what was passing through her sister's mind. Tenderly, she reached out to stroke her cheek. "Brenna . . . you must know . . . if you wish to come with me, I would be glad to have you." Before the younger girl

could do more than start in surprise, she added, "But somehow I do not think this is a journey you can make."

Brenna's tears, sliding unheeded down her alabaster cheeks, fell against Alain's downy softness. The child stirred restlessly, reaching out a small, dimpled hand to knead her breast. Swallowing hard, she murmured, "Whether or not Guyon believes this is his son, I must try to convince him. I love them both far too much to give up now. We belong together."

Edythe nodded slowly. She was silent for several minutes before the neighing of horses and the sounds of men just beyond the tent reminded her of time passing. Her head lifted as she glanced round, as though awakening from a long dream. "Then there is nothing more for me here," she murmured, "and I must go."

Brenna rose with her. Together they left the tent and went to join the *housecarls*, already mounted and waiting. Norman knights surrounded them, but there was no sign of the Duke or Guyon. Heedless of the many watching eyes, the sisters embraced.

"Be strong, little sister," Edythe whispered. "Guyon is a good man. He will accept the truth."

Brenna did not share her confidence, but she said only, "You will always be in my thoughts and prayers. Kiss the children for me."

"I will," Edythe promised. Managing a faint smile, she added, "Let me hear from you sometimes. Remember, I know how well you write and will accept no excuse."

Through tears, Brenna nodded. She watched as the *housecarl* helped Edythe mount. The Normans

drew back, allowing the English horses to pass. They moved slowly through the camp and up toward the ridge overlooking the blood-soaked meadow. Edythe turned once and lifted her hand. Then she set her face toward the west and did not look back again.

Chapter Eighteen

HAROLD GODWINSON, WHO HAD RULED SO BRIEFLY YET nobly, was buried the afternoon following the battle in a small patch of English soil overlooking the Channel. On a clear day, a man with keen vision standing on the windswept cliff could make out the distant shore of Normandy from which the enemy had come with such devastating force. But Brenna saw only the gray waves pounding the beach and the keening seagulls circling overhead.

The grave was dug deep into the marshy ground, the clumps of withered grass replaced afterward so that nothing marked the place where England's last Anglo-Saxon king lay. Before the earth was filled in again, a priest murmured appropriate prayers. Unlike the young man who had kept vigil over Harold's body, this was an old abbot who could reasonably be expected not to live much longer. In the meantime,

he was being speedily returned to Normandy where anything he might inadvertently mutter would reach no further than the walls of his abbey.

With the Christian rites completed, Guyon surprised Brenna. He dismissed the priest and sent the escort down the hill to wait. Alone at the gravesite, he turned to his wife. "Before I call the men back to refill the grave, I thought you might want a few minutes unobserved."

Brenna's eyes, reddened by supressed tears, widened. How much of that terror-filled night at Falaise did Guyon remember? Though he was deeply unconscious when she put the knife to his wound, had some awareness of her preparations somehow reached him? And if so, why did he seem disposed to tolerance rather than condemnation?

All her doubts were written clear on her face, but she still did not shirk from the opportunity he offered. For Harold—and most importantly for Edythe—she would do what she could.

From beneath her surcoat, Brenna drew a knife brought from Winchester. She had carried it for some illusion of protection. Now it would be put to better use. Using the knife, she cut a bunch of late asters, adding to the orange and russet pile a sprinkling of wild herbs. Some small distance from the grave stood a gnarled oak which for centuries had endured wind and storm. By standing on tiptoe, Brenna was just able to break off part of a branch on which a few leaves remained.

Looking at her small collection, Brenna sighed. There was so much that should be there but was not—true weapons, a shield, gold, food, mead. So much a king should have to accompany him on the

journey to the other world. But she had done everything possible. Carefully, she tucked the small objects beneath the shroud so that the Normans who closed the grave would not see them. She was almost done when Guyon touched her shoulder. Wordlessly, he held out a gold band taken from his own arm. When Brenna hesitated, unwilling to involve him, he pressed the ornament into her hand. "Take it. It is little enough to do."

Afraid to let herself wonder why Guyon might be willing to do anything at all for Harold, who had after all tried to have him killed, Brenna nonetheless obeyed. She laid the band on top of the other objects before tenderly lowering the shroud back into place. Hesitantly, unsure how far Guyon's forbearance would stretch, she began to pray. At the first ancient words, he stiffened, but with surprise rather than censure. When no effort was made to stop her, Brenna gained confidence. So softly that the wind could carry no sound, she called upon the gods of earth and fire and water to protect and guide Harold to his rest.

"In the Hall of Warriors," she chanted, "may he find welcome. May those who have gone before greet him at the door with food and wine. May the bards sing his victories. May his heart find peace and his spirit flourish. In the fullness of eternity, may all those he has loved become one with him."

In the silence following her prayer, Brenna bowed her head. Deep within her was the conviction that what she had just done would not be soon repeated. With the coming of the Normans, the old ways would truly end. Even in that part of her that was thoroughly Christian, Brenna knew regret. There

was good in the ancient faith, in the knowledge of healing and the reverence for nature. All that would be lost. At what price, she could not begin to guess. But she did know that the world her child would inherit would be far different from that which had spun out its last poignant moments on the cliff above Hastings. The only life she had ever truly known was over, yet she had to go on. If only for Alain's sake.

Rising, Brenna fought back a wave of unutterable weariness. She swayed, only to be steadied by Guyon's strong arm around her shoulders. Together they left the cliff, pausing only long enough for him to give final orders to the escort. Back in the Norman camp, Guyon led her to his tent.

His eyes mirrored her own fatigue but otherwise gave no indication of his feelings as he said, "I must speak with the Duke and attend to several other matters. Go inside and rest."

For once in her life, Brenna was too exhausted to argue. All the fear and tension of the last ten months, coupled with the lingering effects of Alain's birth, combined to overwhelm her. Her face was ashen and her body trembled. She could think of nothing but the desperate need to throw off her burdens, if only for a little while.

Mutely, she did as Guyon said. His tent was small and spartan, but to her it looked more luxurious than a palace. A cot was set up in one corner, covered by a neatly folded blanket. A chest held extra clothing and small weapons. His shield and the longsword he kept in reserve were propped against it. There was no sign of anything taken from the English dead, for which she was grateful. In the heat of battle, even the greatest lords were known to

indulge sometimes in grisly trophies. But that was not Guyon's way. He had fought often enough for material reward without having to do so in his own wife's land. What lives he took had been only to preserve his own, and to advance the cause of the Duke he still followed loyally.

A faint smile touched her pale lips as she noticed the sheafs of vellum peering from beneath a discarded tabard. Even here, Guyon could not relinquish his beloved scrivening. The sight of those pages reminded her of the partially completed book she had left at Winchester. Wondering if she would ever be able to finish it, she sat down on the cot and drew Alain from his sleeping sling.

He was such a good baby. After being fed earlier in the day, he had slept peacefully through all the upheaval and torment signaling the end of an age. Lucky, as well as good, Brenna thought wistfully. She wished she too could sleep and wake to find the nightmare over.

After changing Alain's damp wrapper, Brenna stretched out on the cot. The baby snuggled against her, waking just enough to seek her breast. Opening her surcoat, she gently eased the nipple toward his mouth. He nursed avidly for a few minutes, but was quickly satisfied. Barely had he finished when Brenna felt her eyes closing. She just managed to straighten her clothes before joining her son in deep sleep.

When she woke, Brenna started up fearfully. For a moment she did not know where she was. The looming shapes of the tent, exaggerated by the setting sun, alarmed her. An unconscious memory of blood and death made her heart pound. When

awareness at last calmed her, she sighed in relief. The sigh changed to a soft exclamation of surprise as she spied the basin of water and food brought into the tent while she slept. In addition, two braziers had appeared. Their glowing charcoal fires radiated welcome light and warmth through the small interior.

A finger tipped tentatively into the water determined that it was still hot. Tempting fragrances rosé from the bowl of spiced chickens accompanied by a mug of mulled wine. Brenna was a little uncomfortable with the idea of someone coming into the tent while she slept, but she banished her unease. Guyon certainly had servants with him. If they cared to minister to her needs, she would not object.

Setting Alain carefully on the cot between two rolled blankets, Brenna made short work of the meal. Except for some salted fish reluctantly swallowed that morning, she had eaten nothing in the last day. The terrible events of the past hours would normally have destroyed her appetite. But Alain's claim on her body was still too great to be denied.

Hunger satisfied, Brenna turned her attention to the basin of water. For the first time she noticed that a towel and fragrant soap were laid out beside it. Smiling at such unexpected thoughtfulness, she quickly washed her face and hands, then considered the possibility of a full bath. After so many days on the road, she had almost forgotten what it felt like to be truly clean. Hesitantly, she glanced toward the closed tent flap. Dare she risk it?

Fingering the closure of her surcoat, Brenna went to the flap and peered out. There was no one in sight except a knight she recognized as one of Guyon's

men. He had clearly been set there to keep watch over her. Reassured that she would not be disturbed, she hastily stripped off her clothes. Thanks to the braziers, the air in the tent was no worse than comfortably cool. Standing on a blanket, Brenna began quickly to scrub herself.

A sigh of pure bliss escaped her as the water soothed her skin. Rarely had she enjoyed a bath more. After the worst of the grime was washed away, her movements became more lingering. Balancing a slender leg on the edge of the cot, she hummed softly as she ran the rose-scented soap all the way from her toes to the curve of her thigh.

Alain's birth had left no scars on her body, she noted critically as she spread a hand over her belly. It was flat once again with none of the stretch marks she had feared. Her waist was still small. The Norman clothes left behind at Falaise would continue to fit well. She wished she had them now. At least they were clean.

The only changes she could see were in her breasts. Still high and firm with generous nipples surrounded by rosy aureoles, they were much larger than before. Her milk was copious and Alain flourished on it. She savored a moment of purely maternal pride before searching for her comb. When the unruly mass of her ebony hair was at last tamed, she reached for her clothes. Only to be frozen in place by a sudden sound from the tent entrance.

"Leave them," Guyon directed laconically. "I told you once they don't do you justice." Coming away from his casual pose just inside the tent, he added, "Besides, I much prefer you as you are."

Brenna blushed furiously. She fumbled for the

blanket. The silken veil of her hair fell away, revealing even more of her body glowing honey-warm in the lamplight. Guyon's dry smile vanished. He stepped forward quickly, the small tent seeming to shrink with his presence. Hard hands grasped her arms, pulling her to him.

"God," he muttered thickly, "you're even more beautiful than before!"

The scent of him filled her—sweat and horses and the essentially male aroma that made her senses whirl. Afraid she would fall, Brenna instinctively reached out to him. Small hands clutched his tunic, beneath which the iron muscles of his chest rippled sinuously. Dimly, she realized he had removed his armor. There was nothing between them but a single layer of sun-washed linen. Her softness threatened to melt into his taut length even as Brenna moaned in protest. "D-don't . . ."

"Don't what?" Guyon growled. "Don't hold you? Touch you?" His massive torso heaved from the overwhelming desire to bury himself within her. "You ask the impossible, Brenna. Nor do I think you really want it."

He was right, she admitted silently. His touch kindled a fire she had almost despaired of ever feeling again. Nothing else mattered except being as close to him as possible. His big hand cupped her buttock, squeezing gently as his warm, tugging mouth sought her nipple.

A low, keening moan broke from Brenna. She arched against him fiercely, unrestrained in her response. Her slender arms wrapped strongly around his neck, fingers tangling in the mass of golden hair. A tremor began in her stomach and

rippled outward. Trembling uncontrollably, she moved her hips against him, relishing the proof of his desire.

Guyon stiffened. His mouth ceased its delightful play on her nipple as he abruptly raised his head. A dark flush spread over his high-boned cheeks. A stab of frustration so acute as to be painful darted through Brenna. She stared at him in bewilderment. "G-Guyon . . . why . . . ?"

The amber eyes fell, drawing her own down to the aroused peak on which a few drops of milk shone opalescently. "I didn't mean . . ." Guyon began harshly. "God! For a moment I actually forgot. The baby . . ."

It was Brenna's turn to draw away. His sudden mention of the child was like a draught of ice water thrown over her heated flesh. Dismally she remembered the moment in the Duke's tent when he questioned the child's birth date. Tearing herself from his arms, Brenna wrapped herself quickly in the blanket. It was flimsy protection indeed from Guyon's wrath, but all that was available to her. Not until she was completely covered did she face him again.

Her head high, the glorious ebony hair spilling over her shoulders, Brenna said firmly. "The baby is yours, my lord. He was born two weeks ago, about ten days overdue. I cherish the memory of his conception, but you may choose to doubt me. If so, you deny your own son."

Her husband's look of stupefied bewilderment finally silenced her. For a long moment they stared at each other, comprehension slowly dawning on Guyon's face even as Brenna became increasingly

puzzled. When he suddenly smiled, a beaming grin that reached clear to his eyes, her mouth dropped open.

"You thought," he chided gently, "that I believed you unfaithful? That I didn't think the child is mine? How could you be so foolish? I would have to be blind not to see how he resembles me. But far more than that, I would have to be of little honor myself to doubt yours."

"B-but . . . he was conceived so soon before we parted . . . and then born late . . ." Brenna faltered, ". . . so that I feared . . . considering the circumstances of our parting . . ."

"Oh, yes, our parting." Crossing the small distance between them, Guyon took her once again into his arms. He held her a little way apart so that he could look into her eyes as he said, "I have thought about that quite alot these last months." His smile became self-deprecating. "There we had just shared what was to me at least a remarkably beautiful and moving experience. You had endured great hardship to be with me, which made me admire and love you even more. Your words, your gestures, everything about you spoke of your profound desire to stay with me. Then suddenly you were gone."

"I can explain," Brenna began, only to be cut off by Guyon's gentle kiss.

"You don't have to. After I ranted and raved for several days, the truth began to penetrate. I realized the English troops had been about to discover us when you distracted them. I tried to go after you, only to be stopped by my men." He laughed ruefully. "They hit me over the head. By the time I regained consciousness, we were back in Normandy.

For a while, all I wanted to do was slay them. Finally, I had to accept the fact that if I had gone after you, I would only have succeeded in getting myself killed and further endangering you." A husky note entered his voice as he concluded, "You cannot know what these months have cost me, Brenna. It was bad enough during the days, but at night all I could do was lie awake longing for you. Every time the Duke sent one of his messages to London, I had to fight the urge to include a letter to you. All our reports said that Harold was getting angrier and angrier, as William intended. I feared any reminder of our marriage might worsen your situation."

"I longed for you, too," Brenna admitted tearfully, all her doubts about his actions since their separation dissolving rapidly. "Only the knowledge that I carried your child kept me sane. For a while, I feared we might never see each other again. Then when all the talk of invasion started, I lived in dread that you might be killed. Finally, after Alain was born late, I thought you might repudiate us."

"Oh, Brenna," Guyon groaned, clasping her tightly. "There's been so much pain and misunderstanding. And now, we may be farther apart than ever." He hesitated, as though unwilling to say the words, but finally murmured, "I prayed that William would give up his idea of invasion. I hoped for some diplomatic settlement that would allow our peoples to live in peace. But he was adamant. He believes it is his destiny to rule England, and he would not let anything or anyone stand in his way. When I realized he could not be deterred, I had to go along, if only for the chance to protect you. Believe me, Brenna,"

he pleaded, "I at least have not come as a conqueror. I did not want the death of your kinsmen or the subjugation of your land. But after what you have seen here, I will not blame you if you regard me as an enemy."

Brenna leaned back in his arms far enough to stare into his amber eyes. What she saw there made her breath catch in her throat. Never had she witnessed such love, or such fear. Guyon truly believed she might hate him. The embarrassment she had been feeling for her own foolish thoughts faded a little. She was not the only one who needed to learn more about trusting as a part of loving. Very softly, so that he had to lean closer to hear her, she whispered, "You haven't asked me your son's name."

Whatever he had expected her to say, it was not that. Blinking back his surprise, Guyon said, "Whatever you have chosen is fine with me."

"Good," Brenna informed him, smiling now. "Our son is named Alain." She paused, waiting to see if he understood.

Guyon did. It took a moment, but then the meaning of that ancient Celtic word surfaced in his mind. Harmony. The melding of diverse elements to create a new and greater whole. Slowly the tension began to ease from his body, to be replaced by joyful relief. Staring into her sea green eyes, he saw all his own love reflected there. A love that now encompassed the child they had made together.

"Brenna . . ." the sound was a breath of exaltation sent soaring on the wind. It was matched by the triumphant beat of their hearts merging into one. Nothing now could come between them. No matter what lay ahead, the love born in passion and proven

in pain would carry them through. Soon the winter snows would drift over the battlefield, hiding its scars. With the coming of spring, life would blossom anew. Different this time because of what had happened on the blood-soaked meadow above Hastings. Yet eternally the same.

Holding his wife's gaze tenderly with his own, Guyon glanced toward the cot where their son slept peacefully. It was too narrow for them anyway. Gently unwinding the blanket from her, he spread it on the floor. Brenna's hands went eagerly to the ties of his tunic. When they were both naked, their eyes wandered over each other adoringly. For a long, sweet moment, it was enough simply to reaffirm that they were alive, whole, and in love.

Then the need to touch became overwhelming and they reached out together. The blanket received them gently. There on the floor of Guyon's tent, as the night sentries called the watch and the Channel winds blew through the gnarled oak trees, they welcomed a new world that though born in blood would grow to nurture justice and freedom.

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MAURA SEGER has been writing stories since childhood, but only recently decided to make it a full-time career. She lives in Connecticut with her husband, Michael, whose support and encouragement she credits for helping her fulfill a lifelong dream. *Defiant Love* is her first historical romance.

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